Taiwan-New Zealand Dialogue

Cultural Exchange Policies amid Covid-19

by Catherine George, Catherine Lee, Isis Mingli Lee, Ron Hanson, Wan-Jung Wei

Published on 22.12.2020



Alongside commissioning new writing, HUM also facilitates and promotes special events, including panel discussions. We are pleased to support this recent initiative organised by the Taiwan Cultural Policy Research Association, held on October 24 2020 in Taipei, Taiwan, as part of the Tua-Tiu-Tiann International Festival of Arts (TTTIFA). Hosted by Isis Mingli Lee, Director of Taiwan Association of Cultural Policy Studies, the panel brought together speakers from Aotearoa and Taiwan: Catherine George, Senior Consultant of Creative New Zealand International Exchange; Ron Hanson, Editor-in-Chief of White Fungus Magazine; Catherine Lee, Director of Taipei Artist Village; and Wan-Jung Wei, CEO of OISTAT International Theater Organization.

This year, as events around the world have been impacted by the landslide of the Covid-19 pandemic, we understand the importance in maintaining communications between countries through arts and culture to facilitate understanding between people during this hardship. This forum aims to open a dialogue between international cultural organisations and practitioners of New Zealand and Taiwan and to exchange their observations and ideas that may lead to further progress on their works of cultural exchange.

ISIS MINGLI LEE Despite the many online conferences, digital platforms or archives that were initiated in the world this year to share our work in a digital form, real contact and communication are irreplaceable for cultural exchange.

In this panel, I'll first invite the four speakers to talk about how cultural practitioners' lives have been influenced by Covid-19. Then, we'll talk about the measures that you have already taken or any opportunities that you see ahead.

RON HANSON Like everyone, *White Fungus* has been strongly impacted by the pandemic. We had planned to hold a big event in April 2020 at The Wall in Taipei. We were going to bring over an artist from Tokyo, KK NULL, and an artist from Australia, Justice Yeldham, to perform alongside Taiwanese artists. And we were planning to make a small publication to promote it, but then this pandemic started building.

We were fortunate to cancel in January and minimise the damage; because we had lived through SARs, we could see what was coming.

We usually do a lot of publishing fairs, but this year we're only doing the Taipei one, so that's frustrating. The Bangkok Art Book fair decided to develop a new online platform and invited us to be part of it. I interviewed a writer from England, Nicholas Thoburn, about artist publishing and it was then translated into Thai, which was very exciting. Also *Flaneur*, a magazine from Berlin, who had a residency here and made an issue on Taiwan, decided to give over their Instagram page, and invited other publishers to share their experiences of the pandemic.

I started studying Taiwan's response to the pandemic and wrote articles for *The Spinoff* and Asia New Zealand Foundation, and I did a television interview on the TVNZ show *Q&A*. It was rewarding to see mutual interest between Taiwan and New Zealand.

People are going online, but it's not always as effective as you'd like it to be. You've got to do a little bit more than just standing in front of the webcam and speaking. The most effective example I've seen was a Taipei organisation, Lacking Sound Festival, that did a live performance within a set. They had multiple cameras, lighting etc.

It was a real production. So I think that if we are going online, we need to think of it as if we're producing a television show.

This is an opportunity for New Zealand and Taiwan to innovate, as two island countries who are physically isolated and on the margins. We should be aware of our good fortune and develop these platforms, not just during the pandemic but to overcome distance on the long-term.

CATHERINE GEORGE It's obviously a difficult time for everyone, but I'm pleased that both Taiwan and New Zealand have focused on people's health and safety as a priority and taken this challenge in a positive way. New Zealand went into a nationwide lockdown at the end of March, so Creative New Zealand's first priority was to ensure that there was financial support and stability available for artists and practitioners who were so heavily impacted.

We paused all funding and we diverted staff and our financial resources towards our emergency response including reaching out to artists to see how they were doing. We offered three strands of funding during this time. The first one was income relief for independent artists and practitioners, to help those who had lost income due to Covid-19, as shows, gigs, exhibitions were cancelled or put on hold.

The second fund was our Arts Continuity Grant for short-term projects that artists could develop during different levels of restrictions due to Covid. Many artists chose to use this fund for research, creative development or professional development. Many were researching new distribution channels. They were obviously looking at the digital space as well or getting their digital assets together.

And then lastly we offered a short-term relief for our major institutions and we recently received a significant investment from our government to keep that work going.

But now, we're shifting our attention to supporting artists and organisations to adapt. International activity and cultural exchange projects have been impacted, and of course, nothing

replaces face-to-face contact. However, there's no limitation on the exchange of ideas. As a case in point, I can still participate in this conversation. We're seeing local artists working for different international locations. We can still ship out work internationally, and install remotely.

Digital distribution and remote residencies are quickly becoming a viable replacement for those face-to-face exchanges. So we are actively encouraging artists and practitioners to continue with their international activity and proactively connect with our international peers. For example, we've been supporting New Zealand artists to participate in a range of international conferences and platforms. Recently, the Western Arts Alliance conference, based out of the US, was virtual and some of our Māori practitioners were speakers in the Advancing Indigenous Performance Programme.

It's really important for artists to engage with these conversations, to hear how others are responding to this changing environment and to contribute to that dialogue.



Taiwan-New Zealand Dialogue on Cultural Exchange Policies amid Covid-19 panel discussion, featuring (L to R): Catherine George (on screen), Ron Hanson, Isis Li Mingli, Wei Wan-jung, and Catherine Lee. Taipei, October 24 2020. Image courtesy Tua-Tiu-Tiann International Festival of Arts (TTTIFA).



Taiwan-New Zealand Dialogue on Cultural Exchange Policies amid Covid-19 panel discussion, Taipei, October 24 2020. Image courtesy TTTIFA.



Panel discussion featuring (L to R): Ron Hanson, Isis Li Mingli, Wei Wan-jung, and Catherine Lee. Image courtesy TTTIFA.



From left to right: Aimee Jephson, Deputy Director of the New Zealand Commerce and Industry Office; Mark Hanson, Art Editor of *White Fungus*; Isis Li Mingli, Director of Taiwan Association of Cultural Policy Studies; Ron Hanson, Editor-in-Chief of *White Fungus* Magazine; and Lisa Tsai, Policy Adviser of the New Zealand Commerce and Industry Office. Taipei, October 2020. Image courtesy TTTIFA.

WAN-JUNG WEI At OISTAT, we cancelled all our 2020 conferences and festivals around the world and we turned them into online events. OISTAT is a global network for theatre makers. I think it was the main way for theatre people to meet back in March. For example, I have a colleague in the States wondering how to teach theatre design, costume design and stage management online. It turned out to be a 32-hour, week long conference.

When governments think of arts and culture, they recognise dancers, performers, directors, playwrights. But as designers and technicians, we are left out. Many of my colleagues in Portugal and Israel started demonstrations because theatre productions cannot exist without designers and we are artists too.

IM Some of us have had enough of online talks and shows. Many countries including Taiwan have been seeking other opportunities by developing economic bubbles or safe zones for travelling. But can there be safe zones for cultural exchanges? You still need to go to work every day, but your work hours are actually much longer than usual, right?

WW Yes, for the Southern Europe and North African International Design Forum my four colleagues and I had to be online between midnight and 4 am Taipei time, for a week. I like online meetings because they give me a new perspective of my colleagues—I meet their dogs, cats, and goldfish and I comment when they have a new book on their bookshelf.

IM We're all trying to laugh about this situation. Catherine Lee, how are Artists-in-Residence programmes impacted?

CATHERINE LEE I don't agree that this is a slower year but it is a struggling year. At the Artist Village, we host artists by seasons. Luckily, residents for season one, which is from January to March, arrived and did whatever they planned. But at the end of March, some of those artists ended up stuck in Taiwan.

We haven't started the second season yet, partly because the Ministry of Labour does not consider an artist residency as work, because we don't pay our artists. So we have had issues with visas.

Taiwanese artists are also supposed to fly out to different countries but we don't know what the current situation is at their destination. The Taipei city government who provides the budget doesn't dare to send people out for safety reasons. So we need to negotiate with our overseas partners to see how much longer they can wait for our artists.

The positive aspect is that the Ministry of Culture provided financial support to artists, who used it to fund new exhibits, to do online shows or to sell works online.

IM What are your plans to overcome these obstacles in the upcoming year? With the 14-day quarantine becoming a regular restriction that we can expect and anticipate, how will we take it into consideration in our projects?

RH These are tough questions, and there's no simple answer. *White Fungus* is reasonably established, so we can adapt. Despite cancellations, we can feel confident that whenever this pandemic ends, we'll still have a profile, contacts and networks. It's taken many years of struggle to get lucky, but we are now hired to work on several projects.

It's emerging artists and practitioners we need to think about, because it's not so easy for them. I'm imagining that for a young person just starting to get somewhere, everyone might have forgotten who you are by the end of the pandemic.

For me, the biggest advantage of this situation is the ability to do research. As so often happens in the arts, people have all these great ideas because they've been accumulating them for years in their bedrooms or with their friends and late nights in coffee shops, pubs. And then once you have any sort of success or develop a public profile, suddenly you're busy, and your stock of ideas starts to go down. So just like a professor needs a sabbatical, artists also need sabbaticals, and this is a great time to do it.

In terms of funding agencies, research grants and prioritising research is really important. I'm glad to hear Catherine George talking about that, because it's a big problem. There's not enough research being done now but there's a lot of time spent online, we're on social media, we're all promoting ourselves. It's good to step back sometimes and think, what am I doing, why am I doing it, how did I get here, and where do I want to go?

Funding agencies could develop training programmes and teach people how to effectively communicate online. Because a lot of us haven't really thought about how to do things effectively.

Another thing, concerning publishing a print magazine, is that we also depend on the postal service. And we don't really want to

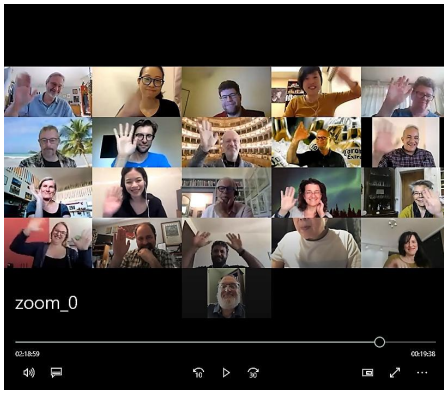
release a print publication until we know we can mail it, that people are visiting bookstores, and that people's attention is focused.



Taipei Art Book Fair, November 13 - 15 2020. Photo: Vivy Hs.



Taipei Art Book Fair, November 13 - 15 2020. Photo: Vivy Hs.



OISTAT International Theater Organization online meeting screenshot, 2020. Image courtesy Szu-Yun Yu and OISTAT.

IM Catherine George, do you at Creative New Zealand have policies, like online training techniques as Ron mentioned, to support artists to facilitate their work internationally?

CG It's certainly an area that we need to work deeply into.

International arts markets have shifted from physical to online events, and this has opened up their platforms for wider conversations. I'd encourage artists to collaborate widely, have conversations with people from other art forms or completely different industries or walks of life. We're living in uncertain times and that diversity of thought is so important for broadening the range of solutions that can respond to an evolving situation.

In our Global Wayfinding programme, which is about supporting artists to strengthen capabilities and stay internationally engaged, we're offering artists the opportunity to have consultations with a digital expert, whether that's someone to help them with their digital assets, their online presence, or something more complex, like looking into how an artist can incorporate technology to present their work.

I hear you, Ron, about artists who don't necessarily know how to translate their work for a virtual audience. We're hoping to run workshops in that area as well. We're also looking to run one-on-one sessions over Zoom or Skype, where artists can talk with a seasoned practitioner for advice or guidance. And so this is when we'll call on our international networks to offer guidance.

It's also given us licence to experiment and take risks . Many people have been quite generous and forgiving during this time, and they're giving people those opportunities or the space to try new things.

I think there's also opportunity in letting go of things that didn't work before. For example, a performer could explore a hybrid model of practice where you can present some of your work digitally, and some in live performance, so that you don't rely on touring completely for your income.

I understand Taiwan's Ministry of Culture is looking at working more with 5G, so we'll start to see a change in how artists present their work, but also in how audiences engage with work. The artists and practitioners might not be able to travel, but art and ideas and knowledge can, this year.

WW Yes, I think this pandemic is an opportunity for those who don't have travel funding to bring their works into international festivals and contests. For example, I have seen many good works from Nigeria and Bangladesh and from other countries who often lack travel funding. But we need to remember that the internet is not easily available in all countries and we should not leave them out of this digitised exchange.

To quote Ron, we improvise to get things going and to find solutions. OISTAT is a 52-year-old organisation. When we established it, there was no fax nor email. For many of our members, those digital processes are bizarre animals.

For the future, I think we will need to rethink some things: Should we consider Zoom performances as live performances? How about theatre architecture? If one-meter distance is a requirement, then how do you build your auditorium? The theater used to be a place

where people get together, and now, if we cannot do that, what kind of events or formats can replace theaters? Personally, I need to learn how to plan an international event when you don't know what will happen in the next 14 days!

And I need to work on how to make a joke properly during online meetings, because it's a different context than when you say a joke in person.



Taiwan-New Zealand Dialogue on Cultural Exchange Policies amid Covid-19 panel discussion, Taipei, October 24 2020. Image courtesy TTTIFA.



Taiwan-New Zealand Dialogue on Cultural Exchange Policies amid Covid-19 panel discussion, featuring (L to R): Ron Hanson, Isis Li Mingli, Wei Wan-jung, and Catherine Lee. Taipei, October 24 2020. Image courtesy TTTIFA.

IM Catherine Lee, what can the Artist Village do to make sure people have access to the internet and are not left out?

CL Actually, I was so afraid of Zoom, because you can see all the faces, but how do you deal with the silence? It's really hard for me to talk to people through a screen.

In the United States, some foundations are funding virtual residencies. It's still in the process of experimentation but we are considering it as well. We asked our international artists but most of them said no, because they expect to travel, to feel the city. Others found a way to work remotely.

This year, a Japanese artist was supposed to come for a three-month residency in the Taichung area, to get to know people and the textile industry through field trips. She wanted to make a map with the locals, but she couldn't come because of the pandemic, so she asked us to send what residents considered as important objects. Volunteers collected objects and sent them to Japan and she recorded the whole process through embroidery. In the end she mailed her artworks to us. So I think artists still can find a way to solve the problem.

A second project planned this year was to visit Brazil but it was cancelled, so we wanted to use the budget to do it through the internet. However we found that each country has a different level of access to technology. There was no Wi-Fi access, no computer available for this type of online communication or cultural exchange. We are so lucky in Taiwan, because Wi-Fi is everywhere, but if we are talking about somebody who lives in a very little town in Chile, she might not have the same access. I never thought about this before. So how can we solve the problem? I don't know yet.

Artists in Brazil told me they are very happy to see lower levels of pollution brought by tourism, and they can enjoy the beach again. But, while the air or trash pollution may have decreased, another type of pollution appeared due to our new habits like ordering UberEats, or online shopping, which increases packaging. I'm really afraid that we will suffer from all those plastic boxes. At times, the pandemic helps us to think about our lifestyle in the coming years or the next age. I feel that facing this crisis will change people, and it will change our way of thinking.

Because of this pandemic, we can see the Metropolitan Symphony or a very good exhibit from Paris or New York online. But if we didn't have the internet, what would we do? If this pandemic happened 30 years ago, what would have happened?

IM We need to be really careful not to leave those without access to technology behind. And what are traditional artists going to do? They may be dealing with crafts and something really physical.

WW I thought that next year we could do an international conference on how much we hate Zoom meetings, with topics like awkward silences, or apologies for bad internet connections. Speaking of awkward silences in online meetings, I think the secret is to get comfortable in front of your camera. As I mentioned before, theatre people are fun and crazy. That is why OISTAT international digital conferences include a section called online happy hour. It feels like we are in a bar but better, you are at your house, very comfortable, with your favourite drink and food. And you can also play with your dog and cat and goldfish.

CL Online experience might really change our life. Maybe in the future, the theatre won't be a physical place. Maybe we pay for tickets and watch the production online. But what happens to our physical cultural spaces? What should we do with museums if no one visits them physically?

IM I don't want everything to be online, I would lose my job I think! We should take more advantage of the freedom we have in Taiwan, although the Ministry of Culture is going to hate me saying this. Baseball teams have relocated their training, but what about cultural exchange? Can we have relocation forums or relocation residency programmes? It could be bilateral, but it can also be multilateral.

RH If we want more exchanges between New Zealand and Taiwan, we need to work on translations. Because I know how hard it is to learn about something that's going on in Taiwan, as an English speaker, and it needs to be easier for Taiwanese to read about New Zealand too.

CG Yes, I hear what everyone is saying about virtual not being the perfect solution. Interesting that one of our main galleries here in Auckland, where I am, found that people were viewing artworks online, increasing the viewership. When lockdown finished, we had more people going to see the artwork in person. So

I think there are probably ways that we can find those two things working together. Hopefully, the digital element can enhance the physical experience.

IM It has been great to have this conversation together. I never imagined this meeting to happen online because I doubt we would be sitting in front of our computers and talking about the same things. The freedom of mobility we have in Taiwan and New Zealand at present gives us more responsibility to think about what else we can do to maintain communications among people via alternative measures of cultural exchange. Policy makers must take more actions and work closer with the artists and cultural practitioners to keep contact and relationships with the world. Culture and art are more needed than ever.



Biographies



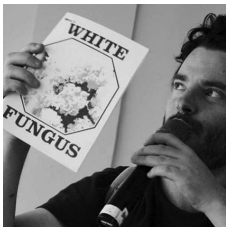
Catherine George manages Creative New Zealand's Focus on Asia initiative which builds stronger artistic and cultural connections with six target territories in Asia. The initiative provides a range of platforms for New Zealand artists to *connect, collaborate and partner* with artists, practitioners and organisations in Asia. Prior to this role, Catherine was based in Singapore as Senior Production Manager for IFA Media where she managed programming for international broadcasters including National Geographic, Discovery Channel, PTS Taiwan, Al Jazeera, and Channel NewsAsia. She worked with teams in China, Taiwan, Thailand and Singapore who filmed extensively throughout Asia and around the globe.



Catherine Lee has been working at Taipei Artist Village / Treasure Hill Artist Village as the general director since 2017. After she received her Masters degree in Museum Science at Texas Tech University, she worked in museums for 17 years. Later on she got her professional training in the artist-in-residency programs in the Bamboo Curtain Studio, the most remarkable artist residency in Taiwan (2011-2017, Taipei). Currently, Catherine is serving as the chairperson of Taiwan Art Space Alliance, which is the national platform to foster communication and collaboration among domestic and international AiR programs.



Isis Mingli Lee is the director of Taiwan Association of Cultural Policy Studies as well as the General Secretary of the B. Shu Sustainable Heritage Association in Taiwan. Isis has experience working in private cultural sectors, NGOs and with the government as well. She was the Spokesperson of the Democratic Progressive Party from 2019-2020 and was the Director of the Global Outreach Office of the Ministry of Culture from 2013-2015.



Ron Hanson is a writer and the founding editor of the international arts magazine *White Fungus*. Hanson founded the publication in 2004 with his brother Mark in Wellington, New Zealand. Since 2009, *White Fungus* has been based in Taichung City, Taiwan. In 2017, the Hansons received the inaugural Special Achievement Award for Contribution to the New Zealand-Taiwan Relationship at the ANZCHAM Business Awards in Taipei.



Wan-Jung Wei is the youngest Executive Director of OISTAT since its inception, also the first with diplomatic training. She joined OISTAT in 2011 to combine her passion for dance, theatre and international affairs, applying this blend of skills to her daily works. Wan-Jung Wei holds a Masters in Arts Politics & Public Policy from New York University. She continuously explores the relation between performing arts and politics with a focus on women's rights and gender equality.

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