

n.paradoxa

online, issue 5

November 1997

Editor: Katy Deepwell

Published in English as an online edition
by KT press, www.ktpress.co.uk,
as issue 5, *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*
<http://www.ktpress.co.uk/pdf/nparadoxaissue5.pdf>
Nov 1997, republished in this form: January 2010
ISSN: 1462-0426

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Mali Wu: A Profile

Katy Deepwell

I first saw Mali Wu's work at the Venice Biennale in 1995 where she presented *Library*.

Library consists of rows of glass books arranged in a formal order on metal shelves. Inside each glass book neatly and exactly titled in gold lettering are tiny fragments of pulped paper from the book itself. This piece intrigued me because of its formalist presentation, its deconstructive impulse and its concrete realisation of an irreverent feminist attitude to canons of (male) academic knowledge. Has this knowledge of the classics really been reduced to dust? Is it rotting through neglect or because it is no longer relevant to today's needs? I wanted to know more about this artist's work and when nearly two years later we established contact through email, she kindly sent me some of her writings and photos of her work. What follows in the next few pages are excerpts from Mali Wu's writing, images of her work and writing about her in the last few years. Linda Jaivin's analysis discusses an earlier version of *Library* in *Gnawing Texts, Reaming Words*.

Mali Wu was born in 1957 in Taipei, Taiwan. She graduated in 1979 from Tamkang University with a degree in German language



Mali Wu *Library* (1995)



Wu Mali, detail of installation *Swing* (1992)

and culture. She then went to Vienna, and shifted her focus to art. From 1982 to 1986 she studied with Professor Guether Uecker at the Staatliche Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf, after which she returned to Taiwan. Since then she has worked as an artist, lecturer and adviser to an arts publisher (Yuan-Liou) and critic, writing for Taiwanese art magazines like *Artist* and *Lion Monthly*.

Wu Mali: Artist's Statement from *Segmentation & Multiplication: Three Taiwanese Artists: Tsong Pu, Fang Marvin Minto, Wu Mali* (Curators Yang Wen-i & Enrico Pedrini) Venice Biennale, June 15-July 28 1997)

'In recent years my creations fall into two styles : objects & installations. My perception of the *object* is merely as a life-size toy. As to the other, I express great interest in *installations* using various media, which implicitly describe the possibility of multiple intersections to seek a sophisticated significance with a space. A growing concern over society is also reflected in my work as an attempt to depict a close link between *self* on a small scale and *the community* on a large scale. Only in the process of seeking freedom and defining my own self did it enable me to deconstruct the human bondage imposed by the external world'

'To live in Taiwan today means to inhabit a fragmented and segmented world, where traditional cultures live alongside new Western ways of life and where identity is continuously put to a text and can be lost in an infinite accumulation of behavioural modes becoming an instance of new energy capable of creating interconnectedness, a reality where the elements of the past conjugate and converge with the evolved facts of the present'

(Press release, Wu Mali, *Scriptura*, Galleria Giorgio Persano, Turin)



Wu Mali : Notes from the 1996 work
TAIPEI FINE ARTS MOTEL
A conceptual way of occupying the
Taipei Fine Arts Museum

'People's desire is always on my mind'

In this work, Taipei Fine Arts Museum will repackage its products in the line of a fashion beauty contest and serve those who congregate a refund, if visitors are not satisfied.

The presentation involved distributing yellow business cards as invites with fuchsia Chinese characters which read :

Registration with government NT\$20 per visit.

Exclusive celebrity club

on Chung-shan N. Rd.

Good choice for fun seekers.

Taipei Fine Arts Motel.

Revamped and reopen/
million dollar interior deco/

Innovative games & outstanding performance.

100% satisfaction guaranteed

Call hot line: (02) 5957656

Special offer: from July 13 to October 13, 1996

The Moral of this piece concerned doing some good by bringing the public into the Museum and illustrating its public function

The Spin: 'Hypocrisy in the closet'

Wu Mali: Artist's Statement

(first published in *The Journalist* a weekly magazine, Taipei, May 5 1996 no.478)

Unlike some people who like to dig things up from their inside world, my works have always responded to stimuli from the outside world. I have always chosen to express my concept in an easy, simple, but tricky way, because I liked to deliberately associate things with my works. This is how I get my pleasure in the creative process.

Wu Mali *Collective Dreams Hong Kong Art Festival, 1996*

In *Collective Dreams*, for example, which was part of the *Out of the White Space* activity during the Hong Kong Art Festival in February 1996, this work actively emphasised the relationship between society, environment and the masses. It reminded me of the close relation between boats and Hong Kong. Boats could be the



logo of Hong Kong. Another reason was the close connection of boats to one of the most notorious personnel in the Hong Kong history, Bou Dzai Dzoeng the pirate. As 1997 is approaching, it would be about time for the Hong Kong residents to think about where to go and what to do. Spring would be the look most magnificent. I enjoyed the feeling that viewers came here to find their own dreams,

n.paradoxa online issue no.5 Nov 1997

ISSN: 1462-0426



right season for dreaming. Therefore, I worked out a plan: inviting everybody to fold paper boats, write down their dreams, or draw pictures of their dreams.

The activity of collecting paper boats lasted about a week, some 4000 to 5000 paper boats came in. The large amount of paper boats of a great variety and diversity were shown in the Art Centre and made it

their own boats, or even to peep at other people's dreams.

One day we hired fishermen to carry those paper boats in a fishing boat cruising in the Victoria Harbour of Wanchai area where the Art Centre was located. The purpose was twofold: to relieve the pressure suffered in the dreams and to wish the dreams to be well blessed. After the cruising ceremony was done, we resumed the paper boat show at the art centre.

These little boats could simply be a symbol of the romantic fantasies, which we all more or less had experienced.

Drifting freely on the sea, the boats seemed so carefree and so individual.

But here in Wanchai, only large ships are seen. This is where the handing-over ceremony site will be when Hong Kong is reverted to China in 1997, and where the British Admiralty still stands in the neighbourhood.

Thus, having those paper boats cruising in Wanchai suggested a contrast between individuals and the nation.

Does my work have too much to do with politics? No.

Because of the geographical connection, the Hong Kong people always had dreams involving boats.

A friend told me that a star singer, Sam Hui, once had a popular love song about the boat.

At a corner of Mong Kok, an old lady idler who had a slight mental disorder was seen sitting on the curbside folding paper boats for more than a year. The old lady always threw the paper boats onto the street, and let the cars run over them or let the wind blow them away.

According to the old lady, the street was like the sea, and the paper boats might just bring her husband back, who deserted her years ago. That the old lady turned dreams into a solid form and ritual of life.

This became the best interpretation of Collective Dreams; for the paper folding, dreaming, and cruising on the sea were all rituals.

Paper folding could be a wordless process, in which silence was written onto every fold. Alternatively, it can be a constantly murmuring process of subconscious

activity. Whichever it might be, the paper folding process was both reflective and anxiety-relieving.

When the boats undulated with the waves out on the sea, they appeared just like cradles, sending out gentle kisses of blessing to the dreams.

From this piece of work, I saw some new possibilities for working away from the land and on the sea or water.

Especially, as Taiwan is an island,

I thought I might actually develop something with a *marine* flavour.

The creator (I) would step back, then let the masses (the collective they) take over and finish the collaboration.

This was also a solution to what I had been seeking for years:

to the question of how to escape from a stereotypical art collection system, which always saw the route of art museum-gallery-collector. Some of my works were intended to criticise this system.



Mali Wu Pink News (1994)

In 1993, I had a solo exhibition at Yellow River Art Centre in Taichung.

The title theme was *When Mini Van Meets Super Mali*, with some *cars* playing the major roles in the show.

The silver one with a shape borrowed from a Mercedes-Benz model was called Proletarian Car; the golden one called Pink News (Sex Scandal), whose name was inspired by

propaganda vehicle used in street conflict.

Those *cars* were actually made by wooden boards and would not move.

The only movable *car* was made with two wheels plus some electronic devices. I called it Super Mali. The name came from a combination of a video game, Super Mario, and my own name.

The idea of this exhibition was like this.

Our galleries are so beautiful, even far too beautiful, whereas more and more car shows have come to be like art galleries for me.

If a car show could be like an art gallery, it would be natural to make an art gallery like a car show.

Perhaps only some viewers sensed the mockery within the work.

However, I thought it was full of fairy tale's delight, because it was so straightforward, so beautiful, and because its implication was planted deeply into an absolutely modern space.

After this exhibition, my friends often switched to calling me Super Mali.

The name would sound like somebody that belonged to fairy tales. While I was in

college, I was nicknamed Little Mali due to my petite build. As such, I felt that the change of my name was a kind of hypocrisy and over-inflation. On the other hand, the name Super Mali sounded like a cartoon character and for this reason I liked it.

In 1994, I presented three pieces of works of the more serious kind, all titled with different name of Disguise (Camouflage, Fake, etc..)

The first one called Camouflage made public in Promenade in Asia exhibited at the Shisheido Gallery in Tokyo, Japan.

It was an electric toy excavator, which kept knocking a hole on a wall. Dust and broken pieces of the wall materials fell out of the hole after the hole was made. Actually, it was I that had made the hole earlier. As the toy excavator could not possibly damage the wall, it was indeed a disguise.

The walls of the gallery suggested the art collection system which many artists attempted to change but eventually had to fall in upon itself.

Therefore I used a toy to make a mockery of myself.

Because during the time when destruction/reconstruction was emphasised, criticism could act as some kind of flattering in disguise.



Therefore, I interpreted this piece work as an 'opposition to the opposition', a hopeless mockery.

In June, I had an exhibition at Taipei Fine Arts Museum, whose theme was another Disguise--Fake. I used an 'empty-city strategy' to present an exhibition space of nothingness. On the wall near the entrance it was read:

'I am the FAKE author, you are the FAKE audience,

Let's stroll through the FAKE museum'

Obviously, the not only revealed the critique of the system but also was a metaphor of the king's new clothes, which is better known as the game of with or without clothes.

Since the show room was so open and so deserted, it could be, without lights and writings, filled with such an emptiness that made me feel regardless of the rest of the world. This feeling could be described, in King Yung's words, as 'Stalking in the universe' (*The Smiling, Proud Wanderer*) because I felt that it had the characteristics of a banquet.

What made the opening day special was that art critic Haiming Huang, who is male but dressed in woman's clothes did a terrific job in guiding the viewers to a better understanding of the work and making them delighted.

In July 1996, I had exhibition with a theme titled *Wrapping Apollo Building*, which was curated by Fan-Marvin Minto's Museum Nomad.

n.paradoxa online issue no.5 Nov 1997

ISSN: 1462-0426

I changed the gallery into a Pawn Shop intending to continue to think from the critical point of view.

In this simple, clean, and inexpensive piece of work, I borrowed symbols from pawn shop, so that the gallery look exactly the same like an usual pawn shop.

The viewers might think that they would not see any pictures, but actually they got instead words as mortgage items to read, such as cars, mansions, curios, calligraphy and paintings etc.

My works are always connected with language. Last year, I presented The Library at Art Taiwan in Venice Biennale. This piece of work was originally a creation titled Gnawing Texts, Reaming Words which was presented at the IT Park Gallery in 1993.

In this piece of work, I collected some influential books from the past, then put them in a paper shredder and let the machine grind up /destroy / chew up them. Later, I filled acrylic boxes with the shredded paper and affixed labels gilded in its original book title on the boxes.



The books had a wild variety of fields, including the ‘Four Books’, the ‘Five Classics’, ‘Three Principles of the People’, *Das Kapital*, *Der Traumanalyse*, the *Bible*, the *Sutras* etc.

Seriously, shredding paper was like breaking the original written structure, which implied rewriting the books.

However, after the books were shredded, the broken pieces of shredded paper instead emerged as a beautiful, well-structured pattern and turned itself

into an art with an eternal value.

Try and imagine this,

How marvellous it would be, when you had turned characters into grains of monosodium glutamate!

I was happy with this piece of work, because it helped me clear my already-crowded bookcases. Besides, the books could go to the right places.

It was during the period that I was working on *Library* I had a dream. In this dream, I saw a coffin shop, which kind of resembled a Chinese herbal medicine shop in a gloomy darkness. In order to explain the material, the decoration and other things about the coffins, the owner of the coffin shop pulled out every coffin as if he were pulling out the drawers from the medicine cabinet.

Some people had said to me my works were full of tough and aggressive characters, whereas in the exhibition place Palazzo Delle Prigioni in Venice, a place better known for having detained loverboy Casanova, my works had appeared gruesome because the *Library* smelt of the last vestiges of ancient civilisations.

The books in the *Library* were classified into six groups:

(1) the World of Art, (2) Encyclopaedia, (3) Chinese Classics, (4) Science and

Civilisation in China, (5) Nobel Prize in Literature, and (6) Godfather (books on or by great men).

This exhibition in Venice meant a lot to me.

Firstly, because of the lure of the Venice Biennale and secondly through the help from the Eslite Bookstore and friends from the galleries I was able to finish this expensive work.

It also seemed to open the door for me to reach out to the outside world, which resulted in exhibition invitations from several countries.

At the end of last year, I accepted an invitation from Persano Gallery of Turin in Italy and had my very first solo exhibition in Europe.

The title of the exhibition was *Scriptura*, which, in Latin, meant both writing and classics. As there were four show rooms available, I worked out a plan to present four themes related to writing and written words. Under the theme of *The Library*, sixty-three books of Literature in Sex, published by the E. S. Books of Italy were displayed.

For the theme of *The Time Space*, crumpled pieces of paper torn off coloured magazines were hung from the ceiling.

For the theme of *The Alchemistic Room*, I made *Zero Point of Literature*, the tapping of a typewriter out of a heap of shredded books was heard, which suggested the writers were allegorised as alchemists.

As for the last theme *The Archives*, fifty childhood pictures of celebrities, good



Mali Wu *Sweeties* (1995)

or bad, from different times and of different characters, were hung on the walls, making the room a nostalgic archive.

Little Sweethearts (*The Sweeties*) was the title of this section, which was sort of a recent creation but not absolutely new. It was inspired by a clipping in which I cut pictures of two little boys and jokingly put the names of a teacher and an classmate beside the boys next to the title *When They were young*.

It had a dramatic but not satiric effect.

In I tried to rewrite the stories of the celebrities where the adorable childhood pictures of the late political figures from three different eras--Adolph Hitler (Nazi), Rosa Luxemburg (Left-wing), and Petra Kelly (Green Party) - were displayed side by side....they were so unhistorical and nonhistorical.

This was done in Europe.
Now, let me think about how to write our own history.

Epitaph: Recent work by Mali Wu

EPITAPH was a work done for a show about the 228 incident held at Taipei Fine Arts Museum in February 1997.

The concept and contents of *EPITAPH* are based on two books: *45 years of loneliness and Sobbing in the dark corner* written by Mrs. Ran Mei-su, and *Documentary film of 228 (Feb. 28 1947) incident* produced by her. This artwork offers condolence to the female victims of 228 incident on the one hand, and on the other respects Mrs. Ran's efforts to record history from another perspective based on her



男人的歷史改寫了

HIS-STORY HAS BEEN REVISED.

暴民可以變成英雄

THE RIOTER MAY BECOME THE HERO.

女人的故事呢？

WHAT ABOUT HER-STORY?

Mali Wu *Epitaph* installation and details (1997)

墓誌銘 EPITAPH

她以眼淚洗清罪孽，
She washed the corpse with tears.
待辦完喪事，親友都回去了，
After the funeral was over and all the relatives has gone,
終於放聲大哭：父啊——我怕！父啊——我怕！
She finally burst out crying: God, I'm scared! God, I'm scared!

她，燒掉所有遺物，從此絕口不言提起，也不再打扮。
She, burned everything, never uttered a word about it nor dress up again.
她，洗髮淨身，坐在家中等待，有一波生死的準備。
She, cleaned herself up and sat at home waiting, prepared for life and death.
她，極強裝，自慚形穢，留下孩子，跑走了。
She, having been raped and felt ashamed, left the kids and ran away.
她，身兼數職維持生計，六個孩子，從剛出生到十歲。
She, holding several jobs down, has 6 kids from a babe to a ten-year old.
她，常常在哭，但兵躲在背後哭，恐懼如影隨形。
She cries all the time, but only in the dark. Fear follows her like a shadow.
她，在雜碎聲中，度過了一生。
She, passes the rest of her day silenced.

她，是複數的女人。
She, is "women" in plural form.
她的憂傷也一直是我們的憂傷。
Her sorrow has always been ours.

own experience as a survivor (especially female) of the tragedy.

The 228 incident was a conflict between the Chinese who came to Taiwan from China after the Second World War and the Taiwanese. During this conflict, there were many Taiwanese intellectuals executed by the Chinese governor. From this time on, these two groups of people do not trust each other, and as a result of this more misunderstanding and conflict occurs.

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n.paradoxa : Issue No.5 , November 1997

Mali Wu : Profile Consuming Texts: the work of Mali Wu

Linda Jaivin

In *Gnawing Texts, Reaming Words*, a destructive violence lurks within the stillness and sanctitude of the library. In this installation Mali Wu presents pulp fiction - and pulp non-fiction-- in the rawest sense of the word. Processed in the blender of her studio, the great literary classics of East and West, art books, Encyclopaedia, and books by or about *Great men* are alike reduced to an indecipherable pap which she then repackages and reshelves. Not all of these works are reincarnated as bound volumes. The Bible is crammed inside a medicine bottle, romantic fiction appears in candy jars and experimental work in the tubes of the laboratory.

'I chose books that have been influential in the past but the authority of which has been much disputed, or works that have become outmoded and no longer influential,' explains the artist. The clarity with which Mali Wu typically outlines the ideas behind her conceptual work as well as the simplicity and directness of its presentation masks its complexity and cultural resonances.

The quiet reading room of *Gnawing Text, Reaming Words* in fact contains echoes



Mali Wu detail of *Library* (1995)

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of some of the loudest explosions in 20th century Chinese Cultural History. The first was the May Fourth Movement of 1919 sparked by student anger at humiliating concessions forced on China by Japan and other Imperialist powers. Many of China's intelligentsia came to the conclusion that the more profound source of their country's weakness lay in its outmoded Confucian

ISSN: 1462-0426

ideology. Their slogans included 'Overthrow the house of Confucius!'. They advocated a complete overhaul of not only the educational system which was based on rote memorisation of classic texts, but of the written language itself. The explosion took place in the mainland during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), when, instigated by Mao, students rebelled against all forms of intellectual authority, burning books, torturing teachers.

China's 5,000 year old history has long been both a source of pride and oppressiveness. From the time of the May Fourth Movement, each generation of Chinese artists and intellectuals (and there is no doubt that Mali Wu is both) have needed to remove the obstacle of that authoritative tradition from the path ahead of them in order to move ahead. Neither the May Fourth Movement nor the Cultural Revolution was able to successfully deconstruct the resilient classical tradition. As a citizen of a very contemporary and world-wise place that is Taiwan today, however, and particularly as a woman Mali Wu is also struggling against the dominant ideologies Western civilisation.....

As the writer Ye Yilan notes in *Mali Wu's Conceptual Works* (Ye Yilan, 'Wu Malide guannian zhi zuo', in *Shinei zazhi*, March 1995, pp. 174-176) Mali's installations are characterised by their 'strong conceptual nature, their social character and their critical attitude'. When Mali Wu first returned from abroad, according to Ye she was struck by the 'political, economic and social chaos of Taiwan'. She wanted to 'transcend traditional notions of good and bad, beauty and ugliness, gender and even the common notions of the difference between art and non art as well as accepted standards.'

Wu's first major work back in Taipei *Time Space* (1985) consisted of a room filled with crumpled newspaper and the recorded sounds of the city streets. Visitors to the show shuffled through the balls of paper, trampling on the text, a culturally rebellious act in itself in the context of a society that so venerates the written word (a theme further developed in *Gnawing Texts*, among other works), and a political one given the fact that all the newspapers in Taiwan at the time were controlled by the state.

Political themes come to the fore in some of Wu's later works such as *Asia*, a huge maze with a red centre created in 1989 for an exhibition in Japan. Regional politics blend with gender politics in the literally startling installation *Swing* (1992). Viewers continually upset delicately balanced bowls and plates on a swing. The frequent sound of breaking crockery was particularly shocking since



Mali Wu *Swing Art Fair*, Taipei 1992



Mali Wu *Female* (1990)

Swing was positioned in the middle of an exhibition that also included genuinely precious ceramics and antiques. It played on the image of the fragility of China, its association with women's traditional duties in the kitchen and the intended double entendre of the English words *china* and *China*.

Gender has become an increasingly central concern of Mali Wu's work. *Female*, a bra hanging on the back of a chair, implies the passivity of the traditional woman, how they are sat upon, one way or another, by men. In the more ambiguous *Portrait* she wraps a meat cleaver in red cloth and hangs a string pearls around the handle, In *Pink News*, one of a series of faux-autos that she has created, a small loudspeaker truck resembling the type used by candidates in Taiwan's noisy election campaigns is painted pink and turned into a military vehicle for the battle between the sexes.....

Linda Jaivin is a freelancer who lives in Sydney , Australia. This article was orginally translated into German and published in the exhibition catalogue *Balance Act* (Stuttgart: Ifa Gallery, 1995)

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n.paradoxa : Issue No.5 , November 1997