

# International exhibitions and Taiwan experience - An analysis of three successful cases

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## **Abstract**

The international art exhibition is a border-crossing realization for culture exchange and experience sharing. In 1997, *L'Age D'Or de L'impressionnism, Chefs-d'oeuvre Du Musée D'Orsay* organized by the National Museum of History is a typical example of the block-buster exhibition in Taiwan. Crowds of visitors, famous works by the great masters of the Western art canon, a collection loan from the Musée D'Orsay, collaboration between major newspaper companies and enterprises, and expensive loan fees are the essential elements for the success of this kind. *Architecture for the New Millennium - Five Architects from Los Angeles* organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei in 2002 and *Vivienne Westwood* organized by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in 2005 have rewritten the history of the operation model of the international exhibition in Taiwan. With limited budgets, the museums aggressively took the lead in the operation of the resources from different disciplines, developed diverse marketing strategies and new museum audiences. They have demonstrated the change of exhibition policy and the maturity of museum professionalism in Taiwan. This report aims to analyze the above-mentioned three cases, focusing on the shift of the exhibition model and management strategy, emphasizing the importance of museum professionalism and the significance of local culture discourse.

*During the Mid-Autumn Festival when I visited the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, I was surprised by the overflowing crowds, the loud buzzing of background voices, the yellow-taped lines on the foyer's floor to accommodate the huge daily queues. In the first three weeks of September alone, over 100,000 people walked through the museum doors. I have been going there for the past ten years and have never seen anything like this, not even for any of its international biennials that brings some of the biggest art world stars to exhibit. So why all the hoopla now?*<sup>1</sup>

- Susan Kendzulak

### **Introduction: International exhibitions in Taiwan's context**

Crossing national boundaries to go beyond the restrictions of nations is the spirit of international exhibitions. Exhibitions from other countries and international exhibitions are a wonderful opportunity for cultural exchange and experience sharing.<sup>2</sup> There are many different models of international exhibitions imported to Taiwan, and the most typical one is the blockbuster exhibition of the great masters from Western art history. However, this model of collaboration with big media has proven unsuccessful in the last decade, and we can see a dramatic decline of visitors to projects carrying the prominent names of Western art history. Due to the accumulated experience over the past years and the maturity of museum professionalism, it is interesting to see a shift of the museum's receptive management of the international exhibition. This report aims to share some successful cases of the last decade organized by three different museums: the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, the National Museum of History and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, so as to analyze the change of interest from the public, the importance of interaction within the local context and the maturity of museum

professionalism in Taiwan.

As early as 1956, the National Museum of History has been active as the promoter for international projects since its opening in 1955. Exhibitions of contemporary art from Taiwan were organized to participate in the Sao Paulo Biennial, and the museum has been active as a liaison for importing major international exhibitions to Taiwan, namely the art of Chagall, the print works of Picasso, etc. After the establishment of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in 1983, with its modernist spacious gallery space and its goal in promoting modern art, the museum has taken the lead in the art world and opened up different possibilities for international exhibitions.<sup>3</sup> The Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei was inaugurated in 2001, in the age of globalization, with its first director Leon Paroissien from Australia, making the museum international from the beginning.

International exhibitions, specifically art exhibitions from other countries, are

<sup>1</sup> "It's due to the Vivienne Westwood exhibition, which has been cynically compared by some artgoers to window shopping at a department store. Regardless where this exhibition fits in on the cultural spectrum (i.e. high or low culture), it was a very shrewd move on part of the British Council to bring this display of reputable high fashion design." Susan Kendzulak, "Art gets fashionable, very fashionable," retrieved from the page on internet, 2006.10.21: <publish.pots.com.tw/english/Arts/2005/10/07/380\_19\_CulturalProduction/index.html> .

<sup>2</sup> In Taiwan, "International" contains a double meaning in the local context. International exhibitions suggest to market Taiwanese art outside Taiwan for cultural and diplomatic promotion; it is further implemented as a diplomatic access and culture promotion of the strategy of marketing Taiwan. The other one is to import exhibitions of other countries, namely the dominant art trends from America and Europe.

<sup>3</sup> Due to its active approach to the world, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum has organized many Taiwan art exhibitions to tour Japan, Germany, Australia, Canada, etc. One of the consistent projects is the participation in the Venice Biennale starting from 1995. Here, the word "international" paradoxically indicates the need for world recognition of art from Taiwan. With strong ideology of Taiwan and financial support from the government, the exhibition titles presented by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum always carry the word "Taiwan" so as to coin the political content of the Biennial. Gao, 1994:182, J.J. Shih, 1994:175.

frequently hosted by major museums in Taiwan. However, what could be the impact? What can international exhibitions contribute to the local context? When and how can international exhibitions at local museums perform well for the public in Taiwan?

### **Models and conditions of international exhibitions**

Over the past two decades, international exhibitions in Taiwan have grown in quantity and can be briefly categorized into six models based on their sources, operating systems, organizer's intent and package content.

1. Blockbuster: exhibition of the great masters organized and supported by big media company; i.e. L'Age d'Or de l'impressionnisme -Chefs-d'oeuvre du Musee d'Orsay National Museum of History (National Museum of History, 1997)
2. Open competition: commissioned by the government and organized by the museum for cultural promotion; i.e. International Biennial of Print and Drawing, R.O.C. (National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, 2005)
3. Academic Finding and Curatorship: art history oriented project realization and collaboration between institutes; i.e. Contemporary Taiwanese Art in the Era of Contention (Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2004)
4. Traveling exhibition: participate in some package international touring, i.e. Vivienne Westwood (Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2005)
5. Diplomatic courtesy: exhibitions recommended by the Foreign Agency; i.e. The Landmarks of New York Photography (National Taiwan Museum, 2006)
6. Themed exhibition: project with international artists initiated by curators; Architecture for the New Millennium (Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002) Exhibitions are very costly, while the

international ones are even more. There are various conditions taken into consideration for international exhibitions, financing, promotion, diplomacy, political issues, etc. Major international exhibitions do require lots of financing, and the big media are skillful in locating supporting patronage. The ideal situation is that the museum curators can be respected to perform professionally, while the big media are responsible for the funding and promotion. The worst situation is that museums become the venues for commercialized exhibitions and the needs of the audience are neglected.

Diplomatic affiliation is another issue that would effect the decision making of the museums. While most of the major museums are government funded in Taiwan, diplomatic and political affiliations are taken into consideration. It is encouraged to host traveling exhibitions recommended by foreign agents in Taiwan for financial and culture reasons. However, intensive participation of the local art world is crucial for the impact of the show. Without appreciation and understanding from the local art world, international exhibitions can easily be off focus and neglected.

Academic finding and curatorship can usually be a strong means for international negotiation and develop into long term collaboration. Meanwhile, curators are usually torn up with funding, project management and educational promotion. The cross-disciplinary team work of museum professionals become crucial to the success of the project.

What would attract the public to the museum for international exhibitions? How can the message from a completely unfamiliar cultural background be appreciated and communicated? What kind of content, audience target, market promotion should be taken by the museum people before decision making? It is a quite complicated issue, and should be better reviewed by the government

funded museums in Taiwan. Some recent cases have proven successful in terms of planning, funding, marketing of the projects. They can be good study models for analysis and enlighten meaningful reception of international exhibitions in the future.

**Exhibition: L'Age d'Or de l'impressionnisme -Chefs-d'oeuvre du Musée d'Orsay**

Venue: National Museum of History

Year: 1997.1.15-4.27

Head Count: about 554,000

Organizer: The National Museum of History, China Times Group and Musee d'Orsay  
Patronage: Citibank, Taiwan PGO Co, Ltd., Sampo Group, Chen Mao-Pang Memorial Foundation, The Club of Art Studies, Cathay Pacific, Fubon Group, Alain Zie Yong-Der

The exhibition was organized following the key concept of civilization of city, with four subjects: scene of modern life, urban city and country, still life, figures and portraits. Focusing on French Post-Impressionism and featuring works by world famous artists, Monet, Sisley, Pissarro, etc., a total of 60 works by 38 artists were included in the show. The works of the show were exquisite examples, marking the major reason for the success of the exhibition. The persistent negotiation and scholarly perspective of the curators from the National Museum of History were crucial to the selection, as it was not a ready-to-go project packaged by the loaning institute. An expensive loan fee was paid, indicating the existing gap of power between nations, and reflected on the unbalanced structure of supply and demand in terms of culture economy.

Intensive publicity and additional programs were planned to have developed high visibility of the show. Meanwhile, patronage from major companies was collected for the general funding of the project. Buses of school children arrived daily. Crowds of people flooded in the gift shop for all kinds of

souvenirs. It was the biggest art news of the year and set the record of a blockbuster in many aspects: quality of the show, number of visitors, sponsorship, publicity, culture income, etc. For the museum side, a big portion of the patronage was committed to the renovation of the gallery space to a temperature and humidity controlled environment for hosting strict condition requirement of the historical works. The gallery space was then proven to be the only professional standard space to meet the restricted exhibiting conditions. In terms of educational programs, there were series of lectures, gallery talks, acoustic guides for the fulfillment of the social role and mission of a museum. An accompanying catalogue published with scholarly contributions by local professors, Lee Ming-Ming, Chen Tung-Ho, Wang Hsiu-Hsiung, Lee Charng-Jiunn, etc., helped to develop the local discourse of the show. A series of articles and audience study reports were written all to demonstrate a deep-rooted reflection of the show.

**Exhibition: Architecture for the New Millennium**

Date : 2002.6.8-9.29

Venue : Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei

Head Count: 41,557

Organizer: Contemporary Art Foundation, R.O.C, Cultural Affairs Bureau of Taipei  
Co-operation: Museums of Contemporary Art, Taipei and the California International Arts Foundation  
Supports: Jan Cheng Junior High School, Taipei, Taipei Architects Association, Dialogue Magazine, Garden City Publishing, Taiwan Architect Magazine

The exhibition, curated by Leon Whiteson, was a collection of five different architects from Southern California, namely Frank O. Gehry, Frederick Fisher, Koning Eizenberg, Morphosis and Eric Owen Moss. The concept of the exhibition is to show how the work of these architects has evolved over the years,

and to reveal, from the first rough sketches to the finished building, how each one develops particular aesthetic concepts, in those selected projects that have been crucial to his or her evolution as a designer. One of the goals of the show was to demonstrate the energy and spirit of the architecture of the new millennium from the other side of the Pacific that has great impact and influence on the new generation of Taiwan local architects. Therefore, how did the Taiwan architects respond to the new trend and evolve into their inspiration? The whole intention of the show was not only to import an international exhibition to Taiwan, but about the ability and capacity of the reflection.

The first strategy was to re-orient the show in space, to present the show through the eyes of Taiwanese architects. The gallery space was designed by local architects Jay Chiu and Rui-Han King of the Da-Han Architecture Firm, and with a very unique stainless-steel arch structure framed by translucent material and dramatically lit in purple-blue light by the Yuan-Su Lighting Design. The whole space design was an echo to the organic style and spirit of the theme of the show. In the meantime, the sensational presentation has attracted professional consensus and successfully contributed to the interpretation of this newly opened contemporary art museum renovated from the historic building.

A major international symposium “Explosion and Implosion” was accompanied under four themes: Urban Growth and Architecture in West America and East Asia, Form and Architecture under Globalization and Localization, Technology and Architecture and Time in Architecture. Curator Leon Whiteson, Architects Julie Eizenberg and Frederick Fisher from L.A. and many architects from other Asian regions attended: Chang Yung-Ho (China) , Tan Kay-Ngee (HK) , Watanabe Kunio (Japan) , Rocco Yim (Singapore) , and

local architects, i.e. Pai Chin, Kris Yao, J. J. Pan, Gene K. King, Kun Shu-chang, Hwang Sheng-yuan, Hsieh Ying-chun, Su Chung Wei, Jay W. Chiu, Wu Ming Ta, Hu Shyr-fong. The international symposium had established a platform of dialogue for the architects in the region, and then initiated many conferences held in Asian cities yearly afterwards.

Programmed marketing was planned targeting an audience of two interest groups. The main target audience was architecture professionals and the students in all related fields. Gallery talks and lectures were conducted by practicing architects and college teachers, and groups of architecture related students visited MOCA for the first time. Children's workshops were designed for family groups and field trips for elementary school children who were the second group of the target audience. The children's workshop “Joyful Base for Little Architects” was organized with supplies by a Taiwan Lego company. Classes of school children were brought to MOCA to play hands-on with construction/architecture, and spare materials of construction samplings were collected from different architectural firms. Without being allied to any big media, the exhibition and event were popularly discussed in newspapers, magazines, and e-media.

“It was a collection of all the super powers in the field of architecture contributing to the success of the show.” As the architecture critic and specialist Yang Yu-fu noted, “under the recession of architecture in the year 2002, the enthusiastic participation of all the supporters demonstrated the passion for architecture of all these ‘authorities,’ as an attempt to take the exhibition to revitalize the interest of architecture of the public in Taiwan.”<sup>4</sup>

#### **Exhibition: Vivienne Westwood**

Date: 2005.9.1-10.19

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<sup>4</sup> Yang Yu-fu, *Design, Post-Modern Criticism: 1998-2002*.

Head Count: Approximately 150,000

Venue: Taipei Fine Arts Museum

Organizer: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Co-operation: Council for Cultural Affairs, Taiwan, Taipei City Department of Cultural Affairs

Supporter: British Council

Partnership: Quanta Culture & Education Foundation, BenQ Foundation, YunSun Corporation

Event Assisting Organized by Marie Claire

As the art critic Susan Kendzulak mentioned in her article "Art gets fashionable, very fashionable," the Vivienne Westwood exhibition is a blockbuster show at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, and who cares if it's window shopping?<sup>5</sup> This exhibition celebrated the extraordinary career of Vivienne Westwood, who played a vital role in the emergence of Punk Rock in the 1970s and became one of the most original and influential British designers of our time. This exhibit covers the period from the 1970's to the 1990's, with hundreds of her classic works serving as the main theme through a creative arrangement that shows how Westwood's designs interact with culture. A total of 543 outfits and accessories and 145 mannequins were on display.

But, Vivienne Westwood was not a famous artist that most of the Taiwan public would know like Picasso or Matisse. She is a completely fresh idea to the art world in Taiwan. How can the artist be introduced and appreciated as an artist, and not as a fashion brand for the celebrities covering less than 1 % of the population? Vivienne Westwood is a symbol of art of our time. She equals to contemporary British culture in terms of arts, design, fashion and music to the public. So, what were the main goals and strategies for promotion and education in Taiwan? Was it to revitalize the museum by attracting a new audience to the museum? Was it to open up a new dimension for the redefinition of "art"

to the public and the museum?

On the Preview Night, the museum was crowded by local celebrities modeling their Vivienne Westwood outfits as a tribute to the artist. Then during the following six weeks, the museum had attracted 150,000 visitors, with a record-breaking of 10,000 for one day. The visitors are tentatively young in age, between 15 to 35 years, and many of them are first time visitors to the museum. How can the phenomena be explained?

The success of the show can be contributed to various reasons. First, prominent artist Wang Jun-jieh who is the curator of this year's Taipei Biennial was invited to design the gallery installation. Ms. Westwood was personally thrilled by Wang's presentation of the show and felt it was the best-designed exhibition she has seen during its tour around the world. It was quite a sensational experience walking through the gallery space. It was more as a form of art, or an interpretation of one artist for another. It was all about the life, attitude, belief and creativity of an artist, Vivienne Westwood, and had no concern to the commercial side of her design.

Secondly, the exhibition project was a joint effort and cross-disciplinary collaboration of artist, curator, educator, PR, etc. that has proven the maturity and team work of the museum professionals. Taking PR marketing as the case, the marketing plan of the project covered all different media, from monthly magazines of popular culture, fashion, design, art, architecture to daily news, television stations and radio stations. Special radio interviews of the artist were organized for "Philharmonic Radio Taipei," "Radio Taiwan International," "News 98," and

<sup>5</sup> "What a contrast, as in July, the only people walking around the chilly cavernous space were its staff members. Susan Kendzulak, "Art gets fashionable, very fashionable," retrieved from: [publish.pots.com.tw/english/Arts/2005/10/07/380\\_19\\_CulturalProduction/index.html](http://publish.pots.com.tw/english/Arts/2005/10/07/380_19_CulturalProduction/index.html), 2006.10.21

“BCC.” Without allied to big media, the museum professionals are now aggressive with fund-raising, PR promotion, audience targeting, educational programs, etc. Related programs were developed from various different perspectives, music, culture, life style, design, etc., so to appreciate the impact of the exhibition. Series of lectures, teachers workshops, family workshops were organized by specialists teaching art, design, drama, literature, sociology, all focusing on British contemporary culture.<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, the contribution and commitment of the British Council in Taipei have acted with all effort as a liaison for sponsorship of the project, and for the complicated communication of all parties involved. This positive attitude of a foreign agent is most encouraging for future collaboration of international exhibitions. It is regarded as a fair and mutually respected collaboration between institutes and nations.

Fourthly, compared to the traditional high art projects, exhibition of fashion by Vivienne Westwood has captured the notice and interest of the public, so the marketing plan allied with Marie Claire and TVBS has proven most effective.

The exhibition attracted a completely new type of audience who are fresh to the museum “...a museum should be a lively happening little microcosm, an institution that promotes change rather than a dead mausoleum, silent and cold as its icy marble vaults.”<sup>7</sup>

Young visitors ranging from 15 to 20 years were not targeted by the museum people, but did contribute quite a number of attendancy to the show. Their appearance was a big surprise, and the reason discovered is that the appearance of a Japanese Manga heroine Nana, popularly admired, and always performed wearing a punk-style dress designed by Vivienne Westwood. Groups of teenagers came to the museum for the show. Many teenagers were also escorted by their

mothers, as if the museum visit attested to the social code of civilized behavior. The exhibition lasted only 6 weeks, but it was one of the most popular blockbuster exhibitions put up in recent years. Its organization, presentation, marketing strategy and audience targeting have established a new paradigm for the international exhibition in Taiwan.

### Conclusion

From the above three case studies, we can see some changes in the operation of international exhibitions in terms of financing, museum professionalism and the shaping of meaning in local context. Financing has been the most crucial point to the realization of major international exhibitions. Over the past twenty years, the big media, namely the United Daily and the China News, have been enthusiastic in bringing in international exhibitions to Taiwan. *Treasures from the Louvre* (1995, the United Daily) had the high record of 720,000 visitors for the show. However, the number of visitors has declined over the years. The attendancy of the *Art of Dali* (2001, China News, 250,000 visitors) and *Three Hundred Years of French Painting* (2002, United Daily, 340,000 visitors) are the two examples that were aimed to be blockbusters yet ended up with less than half of the expected visitors. The public seems to have lost their passion for the international exhibitions of prominent artists and works due to various reasons, traveling accessibility, expensive admission, crowded experience, etc.

Cooperative patronage has turned out to be very difficult under the economic recession after 2000, and big money for expensive loan fees have proven impossible in recent years. As a consequence, the big media become

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Hu Hui-Ru, PR of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2006.9.30.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Kendzulak, [publish.pots.com.tw/english/Arts/2005/10/07/380\\_19\\_CulturalProduction/index.html](http://publish.pots.com.tw/english/Arts/2005/10/07/380_19_CulturalProduction/index.html), 2006.10.21

more and more reluctant to invest in international exhibitions. The old operating model of the great masters' exhibition, intensive publicity by major media, generous sponsorship from private sectors, the old fashion blockbusters are now legendary in Taiwan.

Now, it is the task for the museums. How to perform the best with a limited budget, a great idea, aggressive marketing, while in the meantime satisfying the demands of the public? Museum work is a collaboration of team work that involves specialists from different fields. Communication and mutual respect are important among team members. The in-house curator, educator, PR, and outside sub-contractual designer, art critic, curator, lecturers all contribute to the success of a show. After years of practice of international affairs, museum people are experienced to modify operating models for different target groups. Museums take the initiative move to approach airline companies, hotels, banks, private sectors, etc. Long term project support programs are developed. The educators organize educational oriented exhibitions allied with the education system, now we find groups of students brought to the museum for their field trip and family groups come for the weekends. All resources are drawn to the museum. It is the consensus of

a museum's function in a society that is developing. With the professional performance inside the organization and long term cultivation of the outside supporters, the basic structure, role and mission of government-funded museums are changing in Taiwan.

Lastly, the idea of international exhibitions is to share experiences of different cultures through art, to open up the vision and tolerance of different minds. It is very important to link up a bridge of communication, to help the public to construct meaning of their own. From the receptionist theory, readers can only adopt whatever they know. Meaning can only be constructed by the side of the beholder. Listen to the heart of the public. Museum professionals should not restrict themselves to the limited authorities for decision making of international exhibitions. They need to take the public's interest into consideration, and audience research and exhibition evaluations should be conducted. Academic culture discourse, educational outreach programs, PR promotion are different aspects considered to encourage more participation and exploration of the cross boundaries communication. Reflection of all kinds of audience should be encouraged, as the meaning can only be constructed by the people themselves.

#### About the authors

Dr. HUANG Kuang-Nan<sup>8</sup> is the current president of the National Taiwan University of the Arts and was once the Director of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (1986-1995), and Director of the National Museum of History (1995-2004). Dr. HUANG has been committed to the development of the museum profession in Taiwan, and has published many books on museum studies, including: *Museum Marketing and Strategy* (1997), *Museum Administration* (1998), *Museum Performance in the New Century* (2002), *Museum Energy* (2003), etc. He was the chairman (2000-2003) of the Chinese Association of Museums and now serves as its chief consultant. In addition, Dr. Huang is the Director General of the College Art Center Association of the Republic of China.

Dr. Huang is also known as a creative artist, adept in Chinese traditional ink painting. His academic interests lie in the fields of art history, art theory, and aesthetics. He got his Ph.D. in literature from the National Kaohsiung Normal University and MA from the National Taiwan Normal University. He is now Professor at the Graduate School of Art/Culture Policy and Management, National Taiwan University of the Arts and Professor at the Graduate School of the Department of Fine Arts, National Taiwan Normal University.

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