

DRAWING ROOM

Yu-Chen Wang In Conversation

Yu-Chen Wang and Yamuna Ravindran in conversation, August 2016

Yamuna Ravindran - You were presented with the whole library, what was your starting point?

Yu-Chen Wang - I actually started from the special collections because they were chosen by certain artists and for me that was interesting... then I completely fell in love with this whole selection [Artists Monographs] because I felt there was an opportunity for in-depth research about specific artists. We talked about the problem of what we have on the internet. It's very broad but not in depth. Often you try to dig in deeper – there's nothing to dig into, but then you get distracted and move on to something else, and then that network expands, infinitely. But then it's problematic not to be able to contain, not to go in more.

YR - It's a bit like snorkelling. You know when you snorkel you can see a lot of different fish from the surface of the water and you can see quite far, but when you dive down deep there's like –

YCW -Another world

YR - There's another world isn't there? And that's like the internet. You follow all these links, you look a bit at this, you look a bit at that, but there's no time to really reflect.

YCW - I think that experience sets a very good contrast between every day contemporary life and the experience here. This is supposed to be a very old fashioned way of getting information, of getting knowledge or to immerse oneself in knowledge. But it just felt very refreshing! Especially I guess, the first half of the year – it has been really, really busy for me – a lot of travelling, a lot of presenting new work, putting out new exhibitions and it feels like I've not had time to sit down, just to be by myself and that is quite beautiful. I guess

also I miss the time of making drawings so much, but that moment of being very isolated and the solitude is quite important for an artist especially.

YR - I remember on your first day you looked through quite a few books. As time went on you seemed to slow down a lot and at the end I think you were spending a whole day reading just one or two books? That shift was really quite interesting to watch, from this sort of rapid information seeking behaviour to a different kind of experience. That's something you noticed yourself isn't it?

YCW - I did. I guess a bit like an ordinary person going into a library, the first thing you do is browse. Obviously my personal interest has driven me to pick up different books – like Phyllida Barlow or Pablo Bronstein, then I read Bauhaus, which I found really interesting. What else did I look at? I looked at Paul Noble's book. I am a really a big fan of his work, but I never really spent time reading about it. Or Tracey Emin. I'm not a big fan of her work but it was interesting to see her drawings and it made me want to draw. Because I thought that there's a lot of freedom in her lines and I think that is quite special. I also looked at Marcel Broodthaers. I started to look at how books are bound. Or I found it very interesting - the title for example like Drawing Now! It's very sort of catchy; but at the same time I think we have seen this title many, many times. It's become not Now anymore. And I think there's something quite interesting about these different books. They are kind of frozen in time. Whereas the internet – it keeps changing. New content is being uploaded, updated. But then here, it has kind of stopped in that time. But then it's also about the future; because the future is about somebody in a future time who is going to pick that up and read it and maybe it will change someone's perception or idea. So that kind of chemical effect won't happen right away. The life of a book is long, but then it needs time for it to actually function as a book.

YR – That's interesting because I suppose also the internet is infinite, unlike this space, which is very finite isn't it. But having those limitations doesn't necessarily limit you does it?

YCW - No, no. It doesn't. I remember I wrote down 'myself and the rest of the world'. It's almost like you're coming in here in one place, but then suddenly I'm travelling to different places and all of these books are taking me in different directions.

YR – Yes, like you said about the future, each book exists to try and propel you to think of something that will make you act.

YCW – Yes, to trigger something. But in order to reach to that moment in the future there's a lot of waiting. Like certain books have probably not been picked up for many years! And then certain books are more glamorous because of often being picked up by visitors. I just remembered that I also looked at Franz West's book. I met him once at a party and had a very strange conversation with him. But now he's gone – which is very strange. I never knew that he did not go to art school.

YR - He didn't?

YCW – He didn't. So he was self-taught. It was so refreshing to look at his early work. It just felt so very bold and also – not afraid, didn't care! But then this other book, which was published by one of his galleries - it was like the perfect part for selling. It was a catalogue for an exhibition and looked very sugary and candy like and so it was not raw anymore. But still, the work is beautiful, it's interesting, it's daring. It was so interesting to look at artists' early work and think about what the commercial world did to them. Also I didn't know this artist [Jorinde Voigt] but I found it very interesting. This is like the weather forecasting, and the scientific research base [on the island Lanyu]. But it's very much about nature. It's very organic. It's scientific... but dreamlike!

YR – Out of personal curiosity, what you said about Franz West and the sort of trajectory of his career - about how his work changes later on, is that something you are wary of as an artist?

YCW – Maybe what I said is a kind of a superficial comment. I don't really know what the right thing is for any artist. But for me I'm moving away from the commercial gallery and I like to work with institutions, public galleries and non-profit organisations. Because that way I can get a lot more freedom for what I want to do. But then I think maybe because I'm not successful to a certain point – then once you are successful enough you can do what you want. So I don't really know what's the right answer.

YR – In your work there is the recurring theme of technology, machines and also plants - in a way examining the components of larger systems in your drawings. That's interesting because one of the first things you asked me was about the classification system here. I wondered what interested you about that?

YCW – I think that's a very, very good question because I think my first couple of days I was really thinking about – 'What is a library?' That idea of collection, or collecting books but putting them into different categories, or organising them in such a way. Before this commission I was working on another commission, with the collection and archive of The Museum of Science and Industry which is a completely different sort of

subject. I asked different or similar questions - because their object collection isn't just about books, or paper and objects. There can be a large aeroplane, or a steam train, or a half broken paper making machine. How do they collect all these different things and organise them? Or thinking about a hundred years' time, will somebody still recognise that specific... say a Ferranti's valve. People won't know what that is and so what documentation do you use to trace, to figure out the functionality, or the makers? I remember I asked you about how you have a short description to describe what a book is, a tag, or index reference.

YR - Subject headings yes... sort of shorthand for describing each book.

YCW - I also remember you talking about curating. You give this comparison. I thought that was very interesting.

YR - Well librarians aren't really curators. Curating involves having a very definite vision about presenting something - a set of objects, a set of works. But we try and remain neutral in our selection and eliminate personal bias. We have to try, to the best of our ability, to document a moment or a subject or something. So we're more like gatekeepers!

YCW - Gatekeeper! Well in a sense this special collection was very much curated by artists who select certain items and try to make certain links according to whatever interests this artist has.

YR - And that's true, you can't ever really eliminate a person that's created something. When you visit the old historic libraries you do see the characters of the librarians there throughout the collection through what they collected, which is a lovely thing as well. So there is of course a subjective element to any library, and apart from myself, the curators here, Mary and Kate have had a strong influence on the character of the library, as well as all the artists that have contributed.

YCW - That is very interesting - the character of the library. So any kind of collection should have a character. It is very hard, because the broader concept of Drawing Room is not to be limited, but you also want to have that specialised information here.

YR - Yes it's balancing that kind of focus, collecting comprehensively but with that focus. And it's difficult because you want to have a sense of quality.

YCW - So have you ever rejected any sort of donation?

YR – Yes

YCW – I'm just curious, what sort of book?

YR – I guess.... Most of that is led by the directors who have an in depth knowledge of what contemporary drawing is... and so if something doesn't fall within that... it's a difficult thing to define but there's a feeling I guess for something that fits and something that doesn't. It's difficult for me because I've worked in historic libraries which go back hundreds of years and worked with researches that are researching the past and I know that people aren't always interested in what is good, they are also interested in what is bad because that defines things doesn't it? Who is successful, and why are they successful and why is this person not successful, because that gives you an indicator of society and its tastes and its values. So.... I'm inclined to collect the bad stuff as well! (laughs) That's what I like to do! (laughs).

YCW – But then do you find it a very strange, well an interesting shift from looking after a historical library to this contemporary library where the idea can be so ambiguous, the idea can be so liberal, it can be so undefined?

YR – I do, I find that really exciting. But I think I tend to always collect as if I'm a hundred years in the future and I'm looking back at this moment and trying to document everything... that is the mind-set, I suppose, of a librarian.

YCW – It's very interesting because I talked about the future and also working previously in the museum of science and industry, I talked about what about in a hundred years' time – how are people going to look at all these collections, and you've just talked about exactly the same thing. It really makes you think about further ahead. And I think that is very, very interesting.

YR – Absolutely. Especially in historic libraries, you realise how one little book can outlast you! There are of course books in libraries that are hundreds of years old, hundreds of years... And so this library could outlast all of us, really, potentially. It is a strange way to look at the present in a way.

YCW – And I think that is also quite interesting too. I talked a few times about what time I'm coming and what time I'm leaving... what did someone say? It was like a self-punishment, like trying to force myself to fulfil those hours. But then for me it was a very interesting force, because I think contemporary life is full of interruptions and it is all full of bits, pieces of information and images. Things are all kind of floating around and I felt I could not grasp any of those, but then only by sitting down - in that moment I was so focused. I

forgot how to sit down and reflect on ideas, and I remember I wrote down something like “it’s very slow paced, you can almost hear the time ticking, but then I am waiting for something to arrive, but I don’t know what is going to arrive”. It’s only when you read something and you think “Wow this is so interesting!” and that is the moment when something actually arrived.

YR – So how does this research experience compare to your previous research experiences?

YCW – For example in the museum of science before I started researching I kind of already had a certain direction of what I found most interesting, which was related to Lancashire’s industry, and to computer technology. This one is different, and is also coming at a very strange timing. It’s almost summer, everybody is going on holiday, and I’m waiting for my holiday, but then also previously I have totally overworked, and so this suddenly feels like I’m not under a lot of pressure. It’s kind of the opposite, I felt like really, almost like I’m being massaged, because the whole world is so busy and a lot is going on, but in here it’s so quiet and I’m just looking at ideas, and not even thinking about “oh I’ve got to make something tomorrow”. And this is also very much purely about my interest, rather than the Museum of Science and Industry project which was very much about the show in Manchester, and had a theme, had an interest, had a direction of where the commission is going. Whereas this one has no theme.

YR – Really open.

YCW – Very open can also be very problematic because you don’t even know where to start and I guess that goes back to your question, because you start to look at so many books, and then you start to look at one or two books.

YR – So you have a separate small notebook for each project you’re working on, all punched and stored together in one little ring binder, and I believe you have five on the go at the moment? Undoubtedly there must be connections between your body of work. But it would be interesting to know if your very open ended research here has crept into any of your other notebooks?

YCW – Yeah I think so, definitely. The first connection is obviously about drawing and drawing is something I have been working on for years and years. Remember that day I was telling you, after reading this book [Bronstein] I go out and I start to see the street look very, very different, and I guess that was very powerful. And I started to begin being even more interested in the idea of the interview, and I think that is tapping into other projects definitely. But I can’t quite tell you exactly what, because I have several books, I noticed I go into

different books to write something down, and move back and forth. It isn't very concrete yet, but I guess time will resolve all this. After I have been doing this for so many years I realised, even though all these different works are separate projects, somehow I'm trying to connect them, in a very sort of elusive way. The weather forecasting instruments I was talking about in that pacific island in Taiwan, it kind of connects somehow, because I think my mind still stays in that very recent research, and I felt I can't physically separate them in a very sort of clear line. And I also believe maybe a lot of new findings which I have accumulated here I might not necessarily apply to making the work here, but then in a year's time or two years' time I might actually use all these things.

YR - I wonder if you should just describe the island?

YCW – Oh yes definitely. This island is called Lanyu. 'Lan' literally in Chinese means orchid, and so it's Orchid Island, the literal translation. This island is in the Pacific, on the east side of Taiwan. It's about two hours boat journey, and the boat is quite small, and so it's a very wobbly journey.

YR – It's just a single island in the open sea?

YCW – Yes, and that experience was very unique. This island has a tribal people called the Yami tribe; they've been living there for centuries. They are closer to Indonesians as a race, as oppose to Chinese like the people from the mainland, Taiwan. So they have a very specific way of living and when I went it was around April time. It was the flying fish season, so the fish are literally flying out of the water and then they come back down, and that was a very beautiful thing to look at. Most of the people are fisherman, and so they live with the sea, and they live on the sea, and all the main food is fish. So in flying fish season they were fishing but then all the fish will be dried so they can have an all year supply. But it is very beautiful - they only fish around that three month season. After June is breeding season, when all the baby fish start coming out, and they will stop fishing. This is very beautiful, they are constantly thinking about the future. They worked this out, they have been doing this for centuries, they know this is the way to continue, not because of all this sort of environmental warning, or these campaigns. Also they've got mountainside and sea coast, so the mountain is another resource for food. I remember the person we stayed with took us for a walk, and we were collecting different edible plants, different sorts of berries and that was our dinner. And there were certain plants - he was saying when you are very thirsty you can chew this, and then that actually makes you feel not thirsty. It was so beautiful!

YR – Wow....that's amazing.

YCW – When we were walking our host, Shaman Jakanan was his name, he was telling us this tree has this symbol which belongs to a certain smaller tribe - they are as one nation but they also belong to smaller tribes. So they have this tradition of the ancestors planting a tree and only the grand-, grand-, grandchildren get the opportunity to use the wood. And this wood is to make the canoe, their boat. Isn't that so beautiful? So they make these marks, certain symbols to say this is my tree, and I'm planting this for my grand-, grand-, grandchildren. And so again, the very similar idea of thinking about the future. And it's that kind of sustainability, of thinking about how to sustain themselves. But this island is also very famous, and also very unfortunate, 30 years ago the nuclear waste from Taiwan was dumped there.

YR – Oh no...

YCW - Yes. And it was a really, really big scandal. The government at the time was telling the locals they were opening factories, so they were bringing new jobs to the island. So the island opened up and let it happen, but it was actually a really big lie. And I think about 10 years ago the government apologised for that big mistake, and agreed to move all this nuclear waste, but until now no one knows where this nuclear waste can be moved to.

YR – Have there been any effects on the islanders?

YCW – Oh yeah, yeah, there were some kind of crazy things, I mean this is all happening in the Pacific Ocean, it isn't just... it is all so close. If you thought about the contamination from Japan, definitely it's in the ocean. We all share the sea together, and so there was various research, like for example fish mutating into something else. But this is the world we live in.

YR – And then what happens if you eat that fish? Nothing good eh?

YCW – Definitely nothing good. But if you think about it, okay this is in the Pacific ocean, but a lot of food that we eat here –

YR – Comes from there!

YCW – Exactly. All this tuna fish, there's no tuna here. It's all connected - the food chain. So anyway I find this whole thing very, very interesting. So that kind of interest in nature, or interest in the ecology of the world, is somehow linked to industrialisation, and globalisation. So my interest in dealing with industrial history here in the U.K. is slowly expanding into a kind of global network of a larger system, which you also mentioned

about, that's the great interest in my work, and I think this whole thing, what we just described is actually connected.

YR - And then at the top of that hill, there's this weather station, with the different instruments?

YCW – Yes I found those so interesting. That weather station looks like from the '50s or '60s. So these instruments look rather old, but then they look quite futuristic as well, and have all these different forms and shapes, different pipes going around and different measurements which I can't understand. But somehow I felt like making that link of when I saw all these different instruments - it is almost like looking at all these different books. I need to be able to understand how this system works, and then I will be able to get that information. And also that weather station sits in such a really interesting place. The day we went was a very strange kind of weather, it was as if we were above the clouds, but we were not that high. We were actually above the mist, but the lower layer near the coast was clear. So we were kind of going through the mist up to the very top and we realised we were in a completely white space. It's very much like here! It's very strange, you are in the wild nature and there's not much of civilisation when you go up there, with all this pretending to be very high-tech machines, or devices, and then you are confronted by this complete whiteness as if you can't see anything in front of you. Then the weather changed so dramatically when we started coming down, we started to see the sea coast again, and it was such a contrast and it felt like that mist was very solid, like very clear different layers, it was a very strange experience. Also on that island there were wild lilies growing, it was so strange and so beautiful, because I've never seen wild lilies growing on such a scale. They were vast and all white, and there were loads of them. Almost like over-exposed, like when you take pictures. Too white, it's like "can that be so white?" Unbelievably white! So it was a very interesting encounter.

YR – And being here, reminded you of it there?

YCW – Yes I was observing a lot of different things and also I'm writing a novella about islands, so I guess in my mind I'm trying to connect different things. It's like I'm trying to connect these different books, different titles, and I notice the same picture appears in different books here...

YR – Ah yes....I mean on the internet, everything, all knowledge links doesn't it? It's obvious.

YCW – But how do you link all these different books? I guess in your previous question you were talking about at the beginning how I looked at 5 or 6 books, it was really about that kind of behaviour which contemporary life has taught us, to browse things very quickly, look for information, look for what you only need, and then

that's it. But then I started only reading one book because it was interesting to actually dedicate that time, to go into something more in-depth. I think it simply was a luxury, it's just something we don't do that often. And I guess this is only - what? - 30, 40 years of internet in our life? It should not be having such a strong impact. I mean for me personally probably it's only the most recent 10 years of heavily using internet - almost can't live without the internet at any given moment.

YR – It is about time isn't it?

YCW – But also even if you have time, you find it difficult to concentrate. Very, very difficult. Almost like losing the ability to write because we don't write enough. Just type.

YR – And I suppose... why does it matter? If we lose writing? I suppose there's the idea that there's great value in these things...

YCW – Mmm... I mean, I guess maybe I spent a lot of time talking about this sort of contrast. I guess what I really want to talk about is from my perspective, because I don't want to particularly feel like I'm commenting on – “oh this is what the problem of contemporary society or contemporary life is”. I feel like what I wanted to say is what I really enjoyed the most is to be able to sit down and to read, and to unfold things slowly, as I turn the pages. I felt that kind of slowly going in deeply to something is what I found the most beautiful and most enjoyable. It may come across as if I am kind of criticising the internet or the way we live our everyday life. I feel like that is not my focus, my focus is about the changes happening in me.

YR - What's interesting to hear when you talk about your experience is that the physicality of the space... that being here is not just about reading, not just about finding information. It's about a different experience, and that experience in itself is possibly what you're taking away, as much as what you've read.

YCW – Yes, definitely. I think contemporary life makes people scared of not doing things, or not being busy enough, or not having enough distraction. Not having time to... contemplate ideas. If you look at these different books for different projects they are a bit like diaries, something we don't do anymore. For example if you're blogging, you're consciously thinking “every word I say is for the public”. But then in this book there's a lot of secrets [Yu Chen's notebook], because I can say ‘oh that artist's work is so not interesting!’ I can say I just remember certain things - totally un-researched information, whereas now I know this is going to be recorded I have to be very careful what I say about Franz West, for example, because it's going to go public. Whereas in this book I do not care about coming across as very judgemental, I'm just simply jotting down some ideas. And

that is exciting and that's interesting, and that's something where I don't even need to worry about censorship, or the need to be published.

YR – So we talked about the fact that many artists use drawing as a preparatory tool for making other work, but for your work you don't make any preparatory drawings do you? So how do you bridge the research stage where you're taking in all these influences to actually producing drawings?

YCW – It's very, very difficult to say. I've noticed for example reading certain artists' books, there were sketches next to the final work, and I absolutely dislike this whole idea. I mean it is interesting I guess to help the viewer to step into that trajectory of how this actually happened. But then what I also wonder is, what are we making the final presentation for? Shouldn't we be making an exhibition or making a work which lays out all these different processes, and why do we look at the final work? So simply maybe that shows the final work is not necessarily so interesting. I'm just kind of contemplating this idea.

YR – Maybe...yes. That's kind of interesting because what interests you is the process, I guess maybe that's what interests you about systems as well – it's the process?

YCW – But do I need to make that process public? I think that is very peculiar, I mean I don't quite understand, I'd be very interested to see what Kate and Mary have got to say from their curatorial kind of experience. I don't know. I mean certainly it would help people to get into that mode, but then also I also feel once this work is produced it's a work on its own, perhaps it has its own life, and I don't need to provide all explanation about why the work came about. It's like you have a child, and you say 'oh this is my child. This is my child when she was one year old, this is two years old, then three, and so on, and so this is how this child becomes... (laughs)

YR – (laughing) my child...

YCW – Do you find that a bit absurd? So this is my final work, I have this stage one, stage two, this is my first sketch, this is my second sketch... I guess, I don't know, it's a process - does it need to be shown? I'm interested to know.

YR – Personally I think it depends on the work. I think your work is very dynamic and I think that's because the process is in there. All your preparation is happening, not physically, it's happening in your thought process. And then that is just there in your final work because it hasn't been put down on paper before. Whereas other artists work in a way where there is a lot of preparation.

YCW – But also I felt there was a kind of worrying, because people don't understand. Therefore I need to prepare all these things to tell that story, to explain that journey. That's something which I find is very much in design projects. You want your client to understand how everything came about. And everything has its own kind of reference and also symbolism, therefore that process is important. So I'm telling my client for example I'm using yellow, because this colour has this scientific research to support me using yellow. So this is me having that experience of being a designer, and I felt like I was constantly having to explain or justify, why I was doing certain things. But what about being an artist? I happen not to explain this journey and simply present you with something. Or I'm trying to present a journey without showing all these different sketches in the way everybody has got used to reading art, or has been educated to understand it. Maybe the problem is that audiences cannot understand, so we have to do all these different things to help audiences get in to that work.

YR – I guess it's that depth isn't it? When you have that deep relationship with something, its ability to transform you is much greater. I find that with a work of art, and maybe this is because I'm more of a reading person as well, when I know more about something then I can dwell on it more, cogitate it and digest it. But when I confront a piece of art, and I'm unable to read it, it means less to me I guess. I don't know, I guess I do like to know a lot about the artist, and their other work, and what they were thinking about. And I guess that's why people like the Artist's Reading Lists – it's a way into the work, what else they were thinking about.

YCW – But this is a lot more indirect. Previously I was talking about showing sketches from different stages, or notebooks from different stages. I don't know, maybe there is nothing sort of right or wrong, but I just prefer to kind of bring in other different kind of references. And like this interview is from a different angle to look at things, rather than say "oh I mixed the red, and I mixed the green, and so I have this colour".

YR – (laughs) – Yes! What colour even is that? Purple? No, that's not right!

YCW – (laughs) A bit of a dirty colour.

YR – Brown! No, I understand that.

YCW – Or when I talk about the island, what's in the head starts to go WHOAAA! You start to portray this island. I'm not showing you any pictures of the island, but you create this image. I talk about the layer, how it's not clear this layer, but it's all misty, and when we go up top it's completely white. And you're saying wow, which world have I arrived at? And I guess that is the most powerful drawing. Because the audience is creating that drawing themselves.

YR – One that just suggests, rather than details.

YCW – Yes. And I think that's also part of the reason I felt like I wanted to start writing fiction. But then this fiction has a lot of drawing elements, because I'm using words to draw that island. But who is making the drawing? It's the reader. So I have to try and kind of create the tree there, the images, and obviously your image and my image will be very different. And I guess that's the fun thing, but essentially we are talking about the same thing.

YR – I've got one more question. So in your practice you use performance, sculpture, writing, photography, video and sound, as well as, of course, drawing. Do you see much of your work in other media as a sort of extension of your drawing practice or are those quite different expressions of ideas?

YCW – Yeah, yeah, I think it's definitely that fascination of drawing, that stretches out to different dimensions. One thing quite nice about talking about "oh I mainly make drawings" is that people immediately think paper and pencil, but then I also quite like that idea of an visible/invisible line that stretches out to– now I'm trying to go global. Because of the nature of me living in the UK and coming originally from Taiwan, and this is my next ambitious project, it's about going global to research how these different things can actually crisscross and join up together, and that becomes our way of living. I think that's what I'm finding most interesting. And that line, or the marks, or the trace - living – it's drawing, as well.