


ART, ARTISTIC PRACTICES, GLOBAL VISUAL CULTURE



Jan-Ru Wan: A Transcultural Journey

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This chapter explores the early life of Jan-Ru Wan, a young fiber artist who grew up in Taiwan and now calls the United States her home. My dialogue with my colleague Ms. Wan explores the intricacies of life in her birth country of Taiwan and her many transitions needed to assume the position of artist/teacher in the US. Our conversation considers Jan-Ru's early years of being nurtured by a large and loving family and uncovers the teachers who played critical roles in her important early years of rapid growth and character formation. Stories of her father's "meditating Buddhism" practice and the importance of the temple and prayer are viewed as anchors for Wan's mystical imagery and labor-intensive work—work necessary for the creation of her on-site installations. Memories of her mother and grandmother and of Taiwan's rich textile industries and beautiful fabrics also form the basis of her contemporary fiber artwork. The place of work, as modeled within her large family, is seen as the heart of a life of fulfillment. Difficulties and challenges are uncovered and posed against the exhilaration of the discovery of a personal voice and a personal aesthetic stance that finally allows her to reconsider the culture of both her country of origin and her new home in the US.

Jan-Ru Wan is a fiber artist currently living and working in Durham, North Carolina; she is an assistant professor of art at North Carolina State University. This dialogue and reflection are an exploration of her early life in Taiwan, her migration to and work in the US, and the formative and transcultural experiences that inspire her current art.

Our Conversation

Alice: Today I'd like to talk about your life and your transition from Taiwan to the US. I'd like to talk about your artwork, how it's changed over time, and the meaning of your art to you now ... what you're thinking when you're making it, what images come from your early days in Taiwan, and what images come from your

current life here in the US.

Jan-Ru: Thank you. Thank you for having me. I would say I was a very, very shy kid. I usually didn't talk to people in kindergarten years, and my mom was worried until one day I called to my teacher loudly: "MY MOM IS HERE" and the teacher was so shocked and started to cry and said, "She finally spoke!"

My parents found out I enjoyed painting, not because I was good at it, but because I was happy when I did finger painting and made everything really messy. So they sent me to classes during the weekends. My father thought maybe I could be an artist one day, but when I went to elementary school—first grade, second grade—all my teachers said, "No, she cannot be an artist. She's too messy" and "she cannot do Chinese calligraphy; she cannot draw things realistically." Partly they were right, because every time I was in my calligraphy class, I put more black ink on my shirt than on the paper.

During that time, art education in Taiwan had no room for other kinds of arts except for classical. My mom still sent me to private school during the weekends, not because she expected me to be an artist, but she knew that made me happy.

Alice: Oh, that's wonderful that you look back on those very early elementary years with such fondness both for your mom and your dad because they encouraged you in the field of art.

Jan-Ru: They didn't encourage me as an artist. In Taiwan, the priority during those years was passing the national exam to go to a good high school and college one day. That was very stressful to kids and families. I was okay on the average but sometimes I had a hard time remembering things—especially Chinese history. China had 5000 years of history ... and a lot of my history teachers ... just recited the whole book. I mean, there's no storytelling with Chinese history. It's so confusing with who had a war against whom and why ... it's very, very frustrating.

Then one day, I decided to draw a little picture, so I drew a picture of this country fighting that country and after I finished the picture I understood the whole thing, so I guess it was the first time I realized that I ... did better if I could visualize things—better than when people tell me things in words. I used this method to go through my junior high years.

And after I finished my junior high I got so frustrated because if I didn't do that well in high school, I would have to stay one more year and go to cram school to pass exams. You have to pay money for special education. So after my exam, I was really frustrated and at the same time relieved that was over. I cut up my backpack from school out of frustration.

Alice: You cut your backpack ...

Jan-Ru: Old canvas. It was an old canvas backpack so I cut it into pieces.

Alice: How many pieces?

Jan-Ru: Many pieces. My parents weren't home. Then I realized, "Oh, no, what had I done?" It was uncharacteristic of the sweet, gentle, and obedient daughter like me. So I decided to sew it together to make a garment for my doll—a really funky one. And then my parents saw it and said, "Oh! She is going into fashion design! She made an interesting garment for her doll! Let's send her to fashion design school!"

Alice: Did you like school?

Jan-Ru: I think so. At the time my feelings were not very strong for anything, but I guess you have no choice. Nobody asks you if you like school if you are in Taiwan and no one asks what you like or don't like. You just have to go. I learned to deal with it the best I could. And that's how I ended up at fashion school, not because I say, "I Jan-Ru will be a fashion designer."

It's because my parents say, "Oh, maybe we shouldn't send her to high school. It would be too much pressure on her," so I went to a special community college, a school just for fashion design. So, that was how I started my training as a fashion designer. During that time I liked learning things. I liked making things, so I really enjoyed sewing with different machines, hand sewing, and all the techniques. But still, I felt so limited within the school because most people went to fashion school wanting to decorate themselves, and I was not like most of them.

Alice: And this is during your high school years.

Jan-Ru: Yes, it was 3 years of high school and 2 years of college—5 years total. And I was miserable because I had not found my passion yet. For 5 years I never

made any garments for myself. I only sewed for the model or more related to fiber art during that time. I had no ideas what the fiber art was; I just knew I was not happy.

I did try to work for a fashion design company for one year, and I just didn't see that as my path, but I didn't know what my path was.

Alice: Sounds confined, actually.

Jan-Ru: Yes, nobody told me there is another world. I only knew one way and that's how people had been telling me, but I told myself there must be another way. Even my parents thought I was worried about a job. "Oh don't worry when you get your degree; we will try to find you a job, a nice job, find you someone to marry and you'll be nice and happy." But I was not happy and I wanted more. I decided to study English harder and apply to school in US.

Alice: Sounds like a real crisis in your life. Now, then did you get accepted to the Art Institute of Chicago?

Jan-Ru: Well, after 2 or 3 years of fighting with my parents, we came to a mutual agreement. First, I wanted to go to Paris and they said no, the only country I could go to is the US. And so I had a couple of choices. I had an American teacher from Illinois and he suggested that I go to the Art Institute in Chicago, and I had no idea what or where the Art Institute of Chicago was and I said, "Okay" and I got in.

Alice: That was a very good choice.

Jan-Ru: Yes, yes, it actually opened my eyes during those years. The first day I went to class ... after the teacher saw my sketches, she took me to the museum privately and talked with me for one hour. We looked at each painting and she said, "You have great potential. Your eyes are different from the rest of the people in the class." And I thought, oh, for the first time people think I'm good at something.

Alice: So you had not really received a lot of special attention.

Jan-Ru: No, no ... I didn't get encouraged before to be different. So the environment of the Art Institute of Chicago was a critical turning point for me.

Alice: Oh, that's wonderful that you had that opportunity and that teacher back in Taiwan. Why did he recommend the Art Institute of Chicago? Do you know?

Jan-Ru: I don't know. He actually taught English but he traveled a lot, and he wrote many poems about the political situation in Taiwan, so maybe he saw the Art

Institute of Chicago as a little bit controversial from time to time. And he knew I wanted more.

Alice: That's wonderful. When I was a little girl in Bloomington, Illinois, my grandmother would take me up to the Art Institute in Chicago, and I remember seeing the paintings of Renoir and Monet in the galleries and how beautiful they were. She took me at Christmas time, and then we went down to see the beautiful windows and the animations in the store windows; then we went to Berghoff's Restaurant for lunch and we went shopping and bought our Christmas presents. But the Art Institute of Chicago was an icon of excellence during my life.

Jan-Ru: It was. I enjoyed all 3 years I stayed there because even during lunch I could walk in to see any masterpiece and have discussions with my classmates or critique the masterpiece because we could go to the museum all the time. The school is connected to the museum so we could just go, take a lunch walk, and see the art. It was really special.

Alice: You're so fortunate that you made that leap.

Jan-Ru: Yes, it was really, really lucky.

Alice: Were there other aspects of your early life in Taiwan that you think were important experiences to your transition to the US or to your work now?

Jan-Ru: Yes, there are a couple of areas. I have thought more about it later in life. The community in Taiwan, and my religion of Buddhism and Taoism, and the idea of balance has played an important role in my life. My father, he's a believer in meditating Buddhism. So growing up we just talked and discussed life and trained ourselves to meditate daily.

I have a wonderful relationship with my father. We just discuss things, anything, so he is really special for me in life. Growing up in Taiwan, I feel he loved me too much and he tried to hold onto me. The more he wanted to hold onto me, the more I wanted to leave because I wanted to search more in life. But when I'm in the US now, I feel more connected to him and also more connected to my culture because while you're out of the society and you start looking back at all your culture, your roots, everything becomes clearer. But when you're in your own environment you don't question things. So a lot of my culture and my roots become my inspiration more while I live in the States. I feel closer to home. We went to a lot of temples on special holidays. You have many rules to follow, and no one questions. In Chinese society, you respect the elderly and the past, and we don't ask questions. Now that I live in the US I realize there are so many different

cultures, religions and rules, and we are all products of different cultures and societies.

Alice: That's wonderful!

Jan-Ru: Yes, it's this environment, which is full of wonderful opportunities, that allows me to look back at my own culture and education.

Alice: Well, speaking of the Art Institute of Chicago, what do you feel you pulled away from that experience?

Jan-Ru: Oh, I think most of it is teaching. My English was okay to pass the exam, but when people talked about art history, they used a lot of adjectives which I could not find in the dictionary, so every day I was sitting in the auditorium of 200 people, and daily I had to record the whole lecture with my tape recorder, and then I went home, rewound the tape one word at a time and tried to figure out which words she was saying—with a dictionary in one hand. Even though I might not get the whole class 100%, I was very impressed with those art history professors who were always very alive and talked about the story behind the art and other aspects of the work. There was more than just the formality of the art. I have felt much more connected with art since then.

And those art history courses were a turning point because I started to realize the power of art and how it related to the artist, and how it related to the society and to the people at the time, and how artists respond to the environment of their time.

Before, in Taiwan, we had to memorize the history for the test. So in those courses it was truly an eye-opening experience, and after that everything became more meaningful. Later, I also learned a lot during critiques during studio courses, and those were huge learning steps for me at that time, but great experiences.

I still remember the first time I was introduced to Robert Rauschenberg's collage works; in my mind I screamed, "Oh, my God, you can do that? Am I allowed to do that?" and "Hmm ... I guess I can do that."

Alice: Yes, I remember my very first art history classes at Illinois Wesleyan. I was in sheer bliss, looking at art history for the first time. The images were so incredibly wonderful to me—complex and wonderful. I must have had a parallel experience to yours.

So your ideas were really starting to formulate at the Art Institute of Chicago. Why do you think you gravitated toward the fibers?

Jan-Ru: I think mainly the fibers give me a lot of potential to create and a lot of techniques to work

with. This media carries a lot of memories and everyone knows fibers and living with them. Everyone has ideas about quilts or stories about them. Everybody has had a grandma knitting something for them, so it holds a wonderful memory for everybody. Even though the material is very labor intensive, people can appreciate ... this “labor of love” which is very important in my work. I cannot find any other media that carries so much weight, and I can still find excitement every time I play with them ... It has been good for me to find fiber art.

Alice: It’s interesting that fiber arts were a real important part of your early life because I share that. My father’s mother had a lot of fibers in her home, and I used to love to play with them.

Were there other things about your early life?

Jan-Ru: Well, if you look at my work, most of the scale is big. It’s about 20 ft by 20 ft or larger, and so the scale is an important element in my work. The material is important. The intensive labor aspect is very important. And I think one more thing influenced my work growing up. My grandma owned a shop to make mosquito nets.

Alice: Oh, my word! Your grandmother owned a shop ...

Jan-Ru: Owned a shop. So every holiday when we went home to my mom’s hometown, I guess my aunt-in-law and my aunt all had to help to make mosquito nets from gauze. And the kids just played with the fabric—just rolls and rolls of ... translucent gauze. At the time it was a mix of cotton and polyester, but it was different colors and they were translucent. In Taiwan the style of a mosquito net covered the whole room. It connected to the corner of your room. There was a hook in each room so you had to construct it into a sculpture.

Alice: Wow!

Jan-Ru: I guess when I was little I just played with the material and my mom and my aunt were constantly making the net.

Alice: In the house?

Jan-Ru: In the house, downstairs, so they were downstairs making the nets, and the kids played upstairs. We have a huge house, and we had all the fabric to play with and see suspended in space over my head. Those experiences must have made an imprint in my mind.

Alice: Oh, it must have... it really must have.

Jan-Ru: Yes, and today my grandmother is 99 years

old, and we are very close still.

Alice: Your mother’s mother?

Jan-Ru: Yes, my mother’s mother.

Alice: I was also very, very close to my [other] grandmother, my father’s mother, and she let me play with all of her velvets and silks. And she had a large drawer in her home where all of her silk scarves and fabrics were. I would also get them out of the drawer and tie them end-on-end-on-end and wrap them around my body and play with those silk scarves.

Jan-Ru: Wow! So you would do a performance?

Alice: I would definitely do a performance! But I remember the beauty of the scarves, the feel of the scarves, and how gorgeous they were when they were wrapped and draped. I think she was probably a very permissive woman to allow me to play with her scarves like I did.

Alice: So, coming back to the US, you had sort of a quest for place, a quest for home, for your career, your new life. How did that transition happen?

Jan-Ru: Well, I think most of it happened after I finished my MFA at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. I met my husband—my boyfriend at the time—in Milwaukee. He’s a scientist. Then after we graduated we decided to get married and moved to Washington, DC.

During the school year, I tried to save money so I didn’t go home often, and then one summer I went home, and I started to realize I had culture shock with my own country. I was a little bit disconnected with my family’s daily life, even though we talked on the phone. It still seemed different. People had gone in different paths, and my brother was married and had kids. One day, my niece and nephew in Taiwan asked me, “So, when are you going home?” I said, “This is my home.” “No, you were here before, and you are from America,” she said, and I kept saying, “This is my home.”

Then I started to question where my home was. I got married in the US, and his family was in China. The reason we stayed in the US was for our careers, but my culture and connections are 50% here and 50% in Asia.

I started to look for my own culture. Most Chinese families have an ancestor shrine in their home, usually to pray for the eldest son. So in Chinese culture if a woman never gets married or doesn’t have a son, they have no one to carry on and pray for them after they pass away. So the idea of home and continuation of the family even after you pass away is reinforced in religion and society. And if someone didn’t marry and she

passes away, her name cannot be in the family book, family shrine, or family grave. So I used my works to question that system.

Alice: Yes, yes.

Jan-Ru: So in Chinese this word means female and this word means home. And these two together, it means *married*. So I started thinking, “OK, so you’re female plus home equal married. OK? So if you’re married minus home equals female. So I start to play a little game, so if a female is not married and has no home...”

Alice: Oh, dear!

Jan-Ru: Yes, and I go back and look at my culture and how I was trained to think about these things. In the meantime to try to find my home, but I guess art is such a wonderful way to express your own feelings and culture. So one of my works is in Chinese:

女 + 家 = 嫁

Woman + Home = Marriage

女 = 嫁 - 家

Woman = Marriage - Home

Alice: Yes, that sounds right. Where you’re living, where you’re staying, where you found happiness could be your home. So are you feeling more at home now that you’ve been in North Carolina for a few years?

Jan-Ru: I think so. I think teaching helps. When I look back at my life, the teachers played such an important role for me. I mean the style of teaching and the different ways of teaching made a huge impact in my life, so when I started to teach, I realized that I had found my second passion. I mean my first passion is to create my work. I have always loved ideas in my mind, and I am so happy to share them with students because I cannot do it all.

Alice: Right!

Jan-Ru: And I’m so happy to see some people find their own voice.

Alice: ... to help people find their own voice? I like that too, and it can take many years.

Jan-Ru: There was a moment I realized what kind of artist I was. At that moment, I was able to examine my own culture like an outsider; I started to look at all things freely. In Taiwan, you see those religious settings intensely and you can see the performances happen on the street. During one of those ceremonies, there were these giant puppets, probably two or three stories high, and people standing inside holding the structure. On the surface, it is highly decorated, and

beautiful except for the scary face, and they would be swinging the long arms back and forth. When I was growing up, I loved to see those performances, but I was always scared to see them at the same time. It gave me a sense of power, attraction, and repulsion—the feeling of beauty and danger!

So even now when I go back to Taiwan, I can still feel that power over me. One time while those people who perform under those puppets were taking a break, I went over to see all those sitting puppets.

They were beautiful painted wood and embroidered textile, and I dared to touch them. I asked myself why they were so powerful if they are just wood and textile?

At that moment, I realized while they performed they made people believe those materials have certain important meanings and certain power by their scale and “unsettledness” or “non-static” form which created power for their audience.

Just like me! I take fabric, found objects, and re-texture them to create new life and then assemble them in this enigmatic form and suspend them in the air to make people believe there are many meanings and stories within. That realization was very important for my works and my teaching because now I can analyze them in much clearer ways and teach my students to find their tools as designers and artists.

Alice: You’re like that too. You can come to rest, but you can also be powerful and assume power.

Jan-Ru: Or just taking the very common material and making something unordinary.

Reflections: Moving from East to West

Jan-Ru’s journey has many stories to tell, many narratives to uncover. We see a young girl searching for a sense of place in the world among a large and loving family, steeped in a culture struggling with its own identity as an autonomous nation wanting at the same time to foster its centuries-old traditions. We see what at times seems like an overly protecting father, a man of great wisdom and caring, discussing all sorts of worldly topics and concerns with his young child. He takes her to the temple to worship and give thanks for a life of blessings and thus teaches his child to exist in the realm of wonder and not-knowing, a realm that will permeate her mature artistic style and remain a source, a touchstone, of her artistic expression. We see also the mother’s role as one of providing for the young child at school as well as at home, of making things with her hands, to “keep the hands busy at all times” with useful work and diligent service—and thus, a role model of dedication to work. And we see

a large and extended family (Noddings, 2002) who all provide *attentive love* to the “obedient” child and her curious nature, while at the same time encouraging her to find her own way, which in this case meant leaving her home and eventually calling another place “home.” And we see teachers, sometimes restrictive and critical, other times encouraging, and still other times, opening up previously unfathomable new doors of possibility for the aspiring young artist.

For Jan-Ru, her early journey of searching for self in a multicultural and globalized world was a struggle. Her memories of schooling in Taiwan were that national exams were more important than her budding interests in art, that her teachers found her artistic work (calligraphy, for example) “too messy,” and that she was not happy as a young “fashion designer” in her high school years or her first and final year in the fashion design industry in Taiwan. She enjoyed learning the techniques of the designer but was not a good fit for a fashion design career, lacking the desire to make clothing for herself or others. She knew she was not fulfilled and wanted so much more. Her lifelong quest had begun, and it included coming to the US to study. She had no idea at the time that this decision would impact her later life so dramatically. The choice of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, at the suggestion of an American teacher she had in Taiwan and who happened to be from Illinois, was serendipitous.

It was only when Jan-Ru finally convinced her parents that she should attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, in the US, that she now believes her personal freedom and personal voice were permitted. Her life in Taiwan was governed by norms of cultural history and tradition, but also provided a broad experience with textile methods and materials that were essential for her work as a fiber artist to eventually expand. Her parents, supportive from the beginning of her interests in art, were also foundational to her sense that she could be an artist.

It then was that “wonderful teacher,” the art historian at The Art Institute who took the young student under her wing and explained art in such great depth that Jan-Ru’s vision as an artist flourished. The mastery of technique had been established, but the final language of form was becoming resolved with the daily walks through the storehouses that were the galleries of the Art Institute. Just the right amount of freedom was given for the highly motivated international art student to perform at peak skill. Jan-Ru had come into a state of *flow* at the Art Institute, and would work with little sleep for days to complete her assignments. Her personal voice was being nurtured by her mentor/teachers and her own drive to learn.

Harvard psychologist Csikszentmihalyi, in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990), discusses the state of “timelessness” that he calls flow when someone is functioning at optimum potential. Like the traditional, multicultural, international, and contemporary cosmopolitan art she found in her surrounds at the Art Institute, Wan knew intuitively that she too could have “artistic license” with her art, which then permitted and propelled her exploration of issues of cultural identity. In her case, it was her transcultural identity and voice that was allowed to surface in her art at the School of the Art Institute and to mature at the University of Wisconsin, as her work began to attend to broad themes of her Chinese cultural history and tradition, memories of home, and Chinese women’s traditional roles—all reinterpreted in contemporary installations that made use of silks, gauzes, and a variety of other fibers.

In *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness*, Nel Noddings maintains that it is imperative to explore biography and narrative with students (2005). She further asserts that it is incumbent upon educators to uncover the mythology that is engrained in our culture and to question the stereotyped belief systems that students hold close. Even controversial issues such as war, violence, or betrayal can be explored in classrooms with students of all ages and can be used to debunk the narrow myths of popular culture. Only with authentic dialogue about important narratives can this method of uncovering prejudice and wrong-mindedness exist. As Noddings observes, there are novels, biographies, poetry, and essays relevant to all school subjects, and these could be used to encourage habits of mind and heart (2005). The habits of mind desired, in such a view, require *critical pedagogy*, a higher-order analysis of subject matter that allows students to see the moral and ethical dimensions of life. My conversation with Jan-Ru Wan, similarly, allowed us to think and talk about the mythologies of her own cultural experiences, both in Taiwan and in the US, to talk and think of cultural stereotypes and expectations, and explore some of the moral and ethical dimensions of her own life. Themes that emerged in our conversation and that seem important to me now include Wan’s experience of living between and navigating two cultures (Taiwan and the US), her search for her own artistic identity and eventual creation of a body of work that brings together traditions from both cultures, recognition of the power of love and caring, and a disposition that allows Jan-Ru to identify her “home” based on her ability to re-envision or re-create a sense of self in the world on her own terms.



Figure 1

Left:

女 + 家 = 嫁

Woman + Home = Marriage

女 = 嫁 - 家

Woman = Marriage - Home

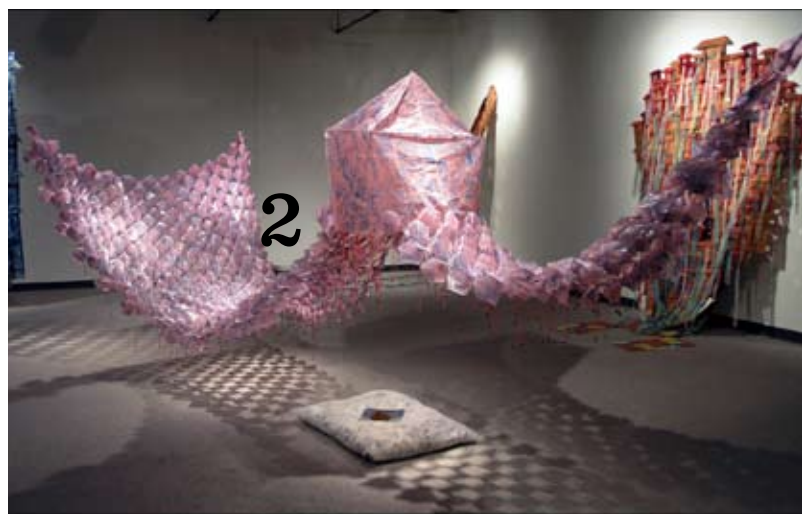


Figure 2

Top: *The Ripple of Resonance*

Figure 3

Left: *Everyone Praying for Good Life*

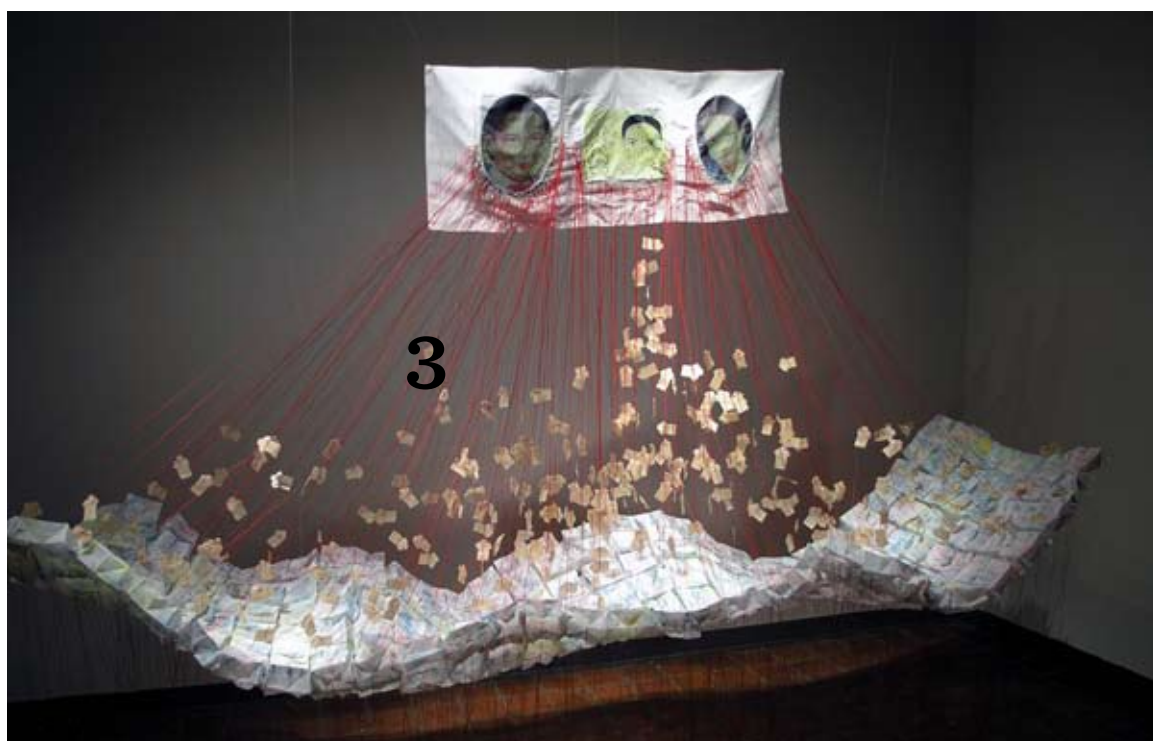




Figure 4

*The Unbearable
Lightness of Being*

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Figure 6

Sarah Kettley's design-led interactive necklace modeled. Permission granted by the artist.

here, it becomes important to think about the fluidity in which craft's identity, along with the identity of the maker is both reclaimed and revised in exciting and problematic ways within digital spaces. Metaphorically, dialogues taking place between tradition and innovation are parallel to the interplay of craft and digital technology.

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WEBSITE RESOURCES

- The New Orleans Craft Mafia* is a group of several independent artists working in a variety of media: jewelry, clothing, accessories, home decor, and others. This website showcases artists' works and events. <http://www.neworleanscraftmafia.com/>
- The Church of Craft* is a community of crafters with chapters throughout the world. While this is not a religious organization per se, the website is structured like the rhyme with "doors" to networking, a "steeple" of wisdom, and "people." <http://www.churchofcraft.org/>
- The Craft Alliance* is an organization committed to community outreach, working with hospitals, schools, and agencies. The Craft Alliance offers classes and workshops, with a mission that everyone should have access to arts learning. <http://www.craftalliance.org/outreach.htm>
- The Craft Relief Fund* helps artists in times of need. Grants and awards are given to artists in the events of emergencies that affect their art-making and livelihood. <http://craftemergency.org/>
- The Center for Craft, Creativity, and Design* is a North Carolina based center that supports craft research and craft programs. As an affiliate of the University of North Carolina, the CCCD also curates exhibitions and provides educational programs. <http://www.craftcreativitydesign.org/>
- Haystack Mountain School of Crafts* is a Maine-based international craft school. A variety of artists teach workshops in craft media for beginners and experienced artists/craftspeople. <http://www.haystack-mtn.org/>
- Jennifer Marsh's International Fiber Collaborative* is a project inviting artists and craftspeople to create a 3 square foot panel of their choice. These panels are connected and assembled into a gas station covering, pointing out and interrogating contemporary dependencies on oil energy. <http://www.internationalfibercollaborative.com/>
- Knitgrl* is Shannon Okey's fiber art website, complete with a blog and resources for schools and teachers. Shannon is an author, editor, columnist, and TV personality of various media relating to fiber and fabric. <http://www.knitgrl.com/>
- Sarah Kettley* is a jewelry artist exploring human-centered design with interactive technologies. Her work includes a range of research projects with jewelry as well as published articles. <http://www.sarahkettley.com>
- The Craft Ark* is a collection of projects and videos for craftspeople. The website includes galleries, glossaries, and a variety of resources for making crafts. <http://www.thecraftark.com/>