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**20TH**



Yin-Ju Chen

Gilchrist

**Embassy of  
Spirits /  
Roundtable  
Discussion**

The following conversation took place in an exchange of emails between 27 October and 4 November 2015. Here Mami Kataoka, Stephanie Rosenthal, Taro Shinoda, Yin-Ju Chen, Jumana Manna and Stephen Gilchrist discuss the idea of spirits, invisible forces, natural and supernatural energy, as well as rituals and festivals, in a diverse cultural context.

Stephanie Rosenthal



# A conversation between Mami Kataoka, Stephanie Rosenthal, Taro Shinoda, Yin-Ju Chen, Jumana Manna and Stephen Gilchrist

YC — Yin-Ju Chen  
SG — Stephen Gilchrist  
MK — Mami Kataoka  
JM — Jumana Manna  
SR — Stephanie Rosenthal  
TS — Taro Shinoda

**MK:** It is my great pleasure to conduct this roundtable for the Embassy of Spirits. The word 'spirits' could be articulated and translated in different ways in diverse cultures, yet in the 20<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Sydney, it was named as one of the seven Embassies created by the Artistic Director, Stephanie Rosenthal.

27/10/2015 01:45

**SR:** I had quite a lot of conversations with artists during my research trip about rituals, spirituality and belief structures, and how different religions are instrumentalised by political structure. I realised that artists see some urgency around this subject matter, and the Embassy of Spirits is a platform for having a conversation about it. By inviting a range of different artists, a diverse conversation about the theme can happen.

The idea of 'spirit' has such a wide range of applications that it is difficult to make clear to oneself all the things it can mean – and that is partly what is interesting about it. Spirit is, as Sigmund Freud points out, the principle that stands in opposition to matter. By this, we understand an immaterial substance or form the existence of which on the highest and most universal level is called 'God'. But it is not the opposite of nature; I see it as being within nature. Taro's work, for example, from my perspective, talks very often about the relationship between nature and spirituality. I was interested in Jumana Manna's work as it deals with the complexity of rituals in relation to music and navigates through different cultural traditions. Dane Mitchell discusses belief structures via his interest in homeopathy. Mella Jaarsma brings in the idea of animisme, and artists like Ken Thaiday Snr and Nyapanyapa Yunupingu present a delicate conversation with the spirits imbedded in nature.

I picked the term 'spirits', as I felt it embraces more the idea of the invisible, the spirit within something, but also alludes literally to the idea of ghosts.

28/10/2015 10:10

**TS:** If you say 'spirits', it is a bit difficult to get the idea for me. But if I replace as 氣 (Ki), I can get the nuance.

Our civilisation is too loud and the voice of Ki is too small. And the voice of Ki is guiding us towards the way of harmony. Under this civilisation, how can we hear the voice of Ki?

This is what I imagine if you ask something about 'spirits'.

27/10/2015 00:49

**YC:** I believe that the universe has its own invisible force that deeply affects our daily lives. On the other hand, the universe has consciousness, and I would like to call this consciousness 'spirit'.

As a Reiki (靈氣) practitioner, I agree with Taro: Ki is guiding us towards the way of harmony. And it is the Qi ('Ki' in Chinese) from the consciousness of the universe that provides us the harmonious rhythm and frequency of body and mind. A Reiki practitioner is the channel that transfers this Qi to people (or one may like to say: to heal people).

In the Mandarin-speaking world, the best way to describe a pretty woman is not to tell her she is sexy or beautiful, but to tell her she is spiritual. I assume that it means one can feel the spirit/consciousness of the universe from this person's presence: she's carrying this harmonious aura around her.

It will be nice to hear others' views.

28/10/2015 16:05



**JM:** I have been interested in spirits as partners through which one can access what has been lost. Spirits might be ephemeral, but they help us better understand material and political realities. In this sense, the idea of spirit(s) is not in opposition to the rational, or the real. Spirits, rather, are the force of lives/things effaced, presented, or translated into other, possibly more subtle, forms in the present. The more attentive we are to spirits, or similarly, spectres, past histories, the more unified and the more resilient we are in the present.

**MK:** For Taro, while you have been pursuing the idea partly through your experience of Japanese traditional garden designing, I am wondering how those ideas of the awareness of invisible forces or energy as Ki have been transformed to the garden. I am particularly interested in the meditative elements in your installations.

For Yin-ju, I am also interested in how the idea of Reiki has been incorporated in your culture and artistic practices throughout history. You have already mentioned the concept of beauty for women, but I wonder if you could elaborate more and give other examples of how that awareness of invisible forces has been inherited in your culture.

And for Jumana, I would like to hear if there is anything culturally specific about the awareness of the invisible realm in your cultural and social background.

31/10/2015 17:49

**TS:** About the Japanese traditional garden, I honestly don't know how they put invisible forces or energy into the design. But the Japanese traditional garden is an abstraction of nature, so it must be that they include this idea of invisible forces or energy. On the other hand, there is no way to explain or describe this kind of thing, so a Japanese garden prepares you to feel Ki.

My installations are trying to make you understand yourself or your environment. There are a lot of things surrounding your situation: politics, the economy, etc. Today's lifestyle makes it so difficult to understand yourself, so my first idea is you need to know yourself. Then you will start to feel the Ki or spirit, and then you can make your own abstraction of the universe.

2/11/2015 at 12:51

**MK:** Just to follow up on this, I was intrigued by the thoughts of Mirei Shigemori, one of the most conceptual garden designers in Japan in the 20th century, who stated:

On account of the use in traditional Japanese gardens of natural planting, natural rocks, moss and so on as raw materials, the finished works tend to be seen as reproductions of nature, but the complete reverse is true. As much as the materials may be natural, in fact they contain within them a resistance against nature.

He was saying that by creating a force that conflicts with nature, the garden becomes a space for new emerging energy. And some of his gardens are true examples of his philosophy.

**YC:** Learning Reiki is a separate issue from my artistic practice (at least at this moment), but it is an important personal ritual for my daily life. However, the invisible force does play a significant role in both my artistic practice and my private, day-to-day rituals.

In my recent practice, this force has been transformed into a concept of mysticism – for instance, astrology: how and why the celestial bodies have influenced the earth and our histories, and how everything is connected, i.e. the macrocosm and the microcosm. In my early training, though (back to school time), like Mami mentioned earlier, Qi was a big deal in the Chinese painting classes. The emptiness, the spiritual resonance, was equally as important as the subjects on the rice papers, the balance of Yin and Yang, and so the viewer could feel the Qi moving on the paintings... And this emptiness on the paper, in my opinion, is the invisible force, energy, or spirit in the reality.

Learning Reiki was not an accident. I had been feeling some type of electric energy floating through my fingertips, a bit like having static all the time (or as my astrologer would translate it: 'because the transiting Uranus is hitting your natal Moon!'). From my years of researching mysticism, I thought



it was a sign for me to utilise this electric energy, so I started to learn and practise Reiki. Why not Qigong, though? I've been asked many times. Well, I really preferred the idea of connecting the spirit of the universe (macrocosm) with us (microcosm).

The other way to explain the spirit in Taiwan is to call it 'ghost'. Going by the lunar year, we treat all of July as a ghost month. Respecting and believing in ghosts is the same as having faith in gods. The big difference, though, is that we build temples for gods, but not for ghosts. The way I have been brought up is that the things you cannot see are very important. One should pay respect to them, because they are there, and they have been there for a long time. Just because you cannot see them doesn't mean they are not there.

What I am trying to say is that the invisible force can be ghosts, gods, spirit, energy, phenomena or spirit, and everything is connected.

The invisible force has just been proven scientifically!

3/11/2015 14:30

**MK:** Awareness of the invisible forces, of presence in absence, is the way to understand our position in the larger universal realm and ever-changing time. As Yin-ju suggests, it doesn't exclude scientific thoughts such as quantum physics and astronomy. It is, in fact, very important that we in the contemporary art field think much larger than the timeframe given to contemporary art and the academic division of the field. I would like to recall what Tenshin Okakura, a Japanese art historian and curator from the early twentieth century, once said: 'We classify too much and enjoy too little. The sacrifice of the aesthetic to the so-called scientific method of exhibition has been the bane of many museums.'<sup>2</sup>

3/11/2015 14:30

**SC:** For me, in an Indigenous Australian context, I understand 'spirits' to be the Ancestors and 'spirituality' to be an intangible expression of adherence to profound cultural values that is activated through ritual, custom, practice and belief. It is both personal and collective; abiding and evanescent; internalised and externalised. For Indigenous people, artmaking has always been both a social practice and a highly ritualised one, and it has been the instrument to facilitate ongoing connectedness to the ancestral and spiritual realms. In its contemporary manifestation, Indigenous art embraces new kinds of rituals and practices. Creating art for an outside audience is both a new cultural performance and a new cultural production, but it continues to condense nuances of spiritual practice in unique and complex ways.

The spectacular ceremonies, in which Indigenous people participate are often used by Indigenous artists as the source iconography for many contemporary works of art. Song cycles are routinely sung, dances are gestured, and the rhythm of ceremony is expressed through the movement of the brush. Manipulating time and space, artists will often paint for as long as the ceremonial performance would have customarily lasted, and often the repetitiveness and mindfulness of ceremonial practice is echoed in the canvas, the carving, the bark or the sculpture. Mark making becomes the mechanism for noting the importance of ceremonial time and spiritual connectedness to the land. Artmaking should therefore not be thought of as mere illustration, but as real-time spiritual communion.

The land has always been the literal and symbolic bedrock of cultural knowledge and spiritual communion. It is the site of all that ones sees, knows and becomes. The shape-shifting Ancestors who created the land, named it, and passed down the laws of social behaviour on epic journeys, eventually metamorphosed into the earth and vested it with their sacred power. These narratives are reconstituted through ceremonial performances and cultural art production to ensure the wellbeing of the Ancestors, their sites of residence and the people who are forever connected to them. Thus, spirituality or spiritual practice is indivisible from the land. It is mediated through a deep engagement with what is seen (the traces of the sites of metamorphosis, the rock holes, waterways and planetary bodies) and the unseen.

Artmaking is not just about communicating with the ancestral traces of the land. It can also be understood to be about re-spiriting the self through avowing this connection to those Ancestors and the sites they created and the models of social behaviour they handed down. 'Being in Country', which means being on one's homeland, is an expression that has a spiritual, environmental and political dimension. It is about the necessary interplay between the wellbeing of the land and the wellbeing of its custodians. It also demonstrates that Indigenous



people believe that we are a part of the natural world and not separate from it. This speaks to a certain environmental consciousness that models a relationship to natural ecosystems that are reciprocal, rather than transactional and consumptive. Finally, being in Country speaks to a powerful sense of sovereignty, claiming a space, a history and a future that undermines and overrides colonial conquests.

I think Stephanie's point about ghosts is very interesting in the Australian context. We sometimes imagine spirits or ghosts as having unfinished business on earth, and as being unable to cross over into the spiritual realm. I think the ghosts of Australia continue to haunt this country. Even though we have a model of reconciliation, and we have had the national apology, there is much that still remains incomplete and perhaps even incompletionable.

I was also interested in Jumana's comments about partnering with the spirits to access what has been lost. I think this idea is one that could be applied to contemporary Australia. Jumana's comment about being attentive and mindful of history in order for us to be more present is a great endorsement of the necessity to confront our past – a spiritual exorcism, if you will – in order for us to be fully at ease with the place now termed Australia.

3/11/2015 14:30

**MK:** Echoing what Stephen said about re-spiriting the self, I also believe that awareness of the invisible realm gives us consciousness of the equilibrium of different values and components of this universe. We can also extend our imaginations to the time of animism and ancient nature worship, when belief systems were not institutionalised. Hearing everyone's awareness, it is fascinating to learn that the consciousness of what we call here 'spirits' has been shared in similar forms such as rituals, local festivals, folklore and tales in diverse cultures. We can see it as an alternative common language for global communication, as opposed to the language used after European enlightenment and modernism.

We could also refer to a number of figures in the past in the West who were aware of the spiritual realm, from people such as Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) to Mircea Eliade (1907–86), who have been quite influential for some contemporary artists. In this alternative genealogy, artists in the recent past such as Yves Klein, John Cage and Allan Kaprow could be revisited for their inspiring philosophies and actual practices. Klein, who was active in the late 1950s to early 1960s, devoted himself to the sustained exploration of 'air', one of the *prima materia* that make up the universe, or the 'emptiness' of the immaterial space of painting. John Cage is probably one of the most important figures who explored this theme. His awareness of the absence of silence has been an indispensable influence on following generations. He said, 'There is no such thing as empty space or empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make silence, we cannot... Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music.'<sup>3</sup> Then Allan Kaprow, with whom Stephanie has worked extensively, conducted a number of 'Activities', which were instructions for stimulating awareness of one's everyday surroundings.

This could be an infinite exploration, however, since the Embassy of Spirits at the Art Gallery of New South Wales is going to be a space for feeling the invisible and 're-spiriting the self'. I hope this roundtable text will resonate well with the physical experience at the site.

<sup>1</sup> 'Sorry, Einstein. Quantum study suggests "spooky action" is real', *New York Times*, 25 October 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Kakuzo (Tenshin) Okakura, *Book of Tea*, 1906, [www.sacred-texts.com/bud/tea.htm](http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/tea.htm).

<sup>3</sup> John Cage, 'Experimental music', in *Silence*, Calder and Boyars, London, 1968, p. 8.