# water chestnut collapsology

Florian Cramer

On the 31st of October 2022, guests of Taipei’s stylish cocktail bar *Bar Pine* became the subjects of an artist’s experiment in controlled food poisoning. The event, called “Isn’t It a Beautiful Meadow?”, was hosted by Hansheng Chen of the Taiwanese artist duo 走路草農/藝團 Walking Grass Agriculture. Their overall work reflects rural culture in its relationship to farming, plants, the environment, and society at large, often using their southern Taiwanese home region of Kaohsiung as a reference and point of departure. The bar event, which accompanied Hansheng’s solo exhibition at Powen Gallery 紅野畫廊 Taipei, featured cocktails and snacks made with water chestnuts harvested in Kaohsiung. The drinks were also based on the drinking water distilled and filtered in that city.

All courses were intercut with videos made by Hangsheng explaining what we were eating and drinking. We learned how the intense industrialization of the formerly rural Koahsiung has so thoroughly poisoned its groundwater that all residents are now forced to drink bottled water. And we learned that this water comes from local distilleries, but that trust in the water is low, due to fraudsters selling unsafe water as distilled water. This, of course, could have also included the water in the drinks we were having at the bar. The gallery exhibition and the entrance to the bar featured installations of large, green glass bottles, the containers formerly used by Kaohsiung’s distilleries to sell their drinking water. Since the distilleries have recently replaced them with plastic canisters, Hansheng collected and repurposed them for his exhibition.

Served with the distilled water was water chestnut, once Kaohsiung’s local food specialty and signature plant, for which the city’s Zuoying district was once nationally famous, Hangsheng explained. He pointed out how chestnut farming was once a lucrative business, allowing local farmers to hire large harvesting workforces - first Taiwanese locals, later Southeast Asian immigrants - and buy real estate. Eventually, this led to Kaohsiung’s transformation into a modern metropolis of nearly three million people with a skyscraper skyline. One of the videos at the bar event showed Kaohsiung’s last remaining water chestnut farmer, a 94-year-old man, harvesting the fruit in a polluted puddle under a highway flyover, an image seemingly from a post-apocalyptic dystopia.

The water chestnuts harvested by this farmer were also the ones served at the cocktail bar: both as food and as cocktails made by Bar Pine’s chef Ariel. They reappeared as shapes in Hansheng’s minimalist artwork and silkscreen prints, which were displayed in the bar and in the gallery exhibition.

The event reflected a number of issues: the safety of the water and food we consumed, the relationship between rural production and metropolitan consumption, and ultimately: whether Kaohsiung’s water chestnut isn’t a *pars pro toto* of a post-industrially transformed, post-apocalyptic habitat (much like the matsutake mushroom in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World*). In Bar Pine, it became a *symbol* - very much in the sense established by Goethe and later in romanticist literature - where physical form and meaning are an inseparable unity. Serving the chestnut and distilled water from Kaohsiung, while educating the audience about their origins, meant that the post-apocalypse became a shared experience, and the medium became the message. (Though no one seemed to show symptoms of food poisoning that day.)

*Isn’t It a Beautiful Meadow?* at Bar Pine was exemplary of how food has become an important medium in 21st-century art. In a conversation with me in 2015, the Faroese experimental musician and artist Goodiepal recalled how he had been invited to a so-called sustainable art festival in France and ended up despising it because it consisted mostly of video installations by artists who had taken plane flights to rainforests to shoot their material, and then flights to the exhibition venue: “So far from being sustainable! It was not (claps hands) practical”. It boiled down to symbolic gestures, in the worst sense of the word. Food on the other hand is hands-on by definition and therefore “symbolic” rather in Goethe’s sense. This can also be a trap. Making food can be a too-easy solution for creating communality in art - just as video has been a too-easy solution for signaling awareness of mass media (in the 1970s/80s) and social reality (since the 1990s) in contemporary art. It’s a different story, however, when food is a simultaneously popular and playful yet thorough medium of socio-ecological investigation, as in Hansheng’s bar event.

[photo caption:] The exhibition and bar event also referenced dinosaur footprints found when Taiwan’s water basins dried up in the historic drought of the summer of 2021 (which also affected the global chip industry, as two-thirds of the world’s computer chips are manufactured in Taiwan, particularly at its foundry TSMC; chip production consumes large quantities of ultra-purified water. The global chip industry consumption is estimated at 100 million liters per day).