

## Ko's actions betray his declarations

Written by Nicholas Yu 余英

Thursday, 05 November 2020 06:23

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A few days before the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) exhibition “The Secret South: From Cold War Perspective to Global South in Museum Collection” ended on Oct. 25, Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Taipei City councilors Lo Chih-chiang (洛智強) and Yu Shu-hui (余淑惠) launched a fierce attack on I-den-ti-ty (隱匿體), a work by internationally renowned artist Mei Dean-E (梅Dean-E), known as the “Father of Taiwan’s Dadaism.”

Lo and Yu said that the work — which uses humor to express the difficult diplomatic situation of Republic of China as a result of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) pressure — was “inappropriate” and could “incite xenophobia, or is intended only to give vent to people’s rage.”

The museum should “gatekeep” the works it exhibits, they said.

During a question- and-answer session at the Taipei City Council, Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) — who has often said that the city has its “Taipei values,” which he defines as “freedom, diversity, and openness” — gave the absurd answer that if Mei’s work “triggers a complaint from the concerned country, we will just give Taipei Fine Arts Museum director Lin Ping (林平) a demerit.”

Ko’s remark triggered a backlash from the art world, while Mei issued a statement calling on the Taipei City Government and certain city councilors not to give in to the “vice of self-censorship” and use their status to cancel the exhibition and harm public art.

During another interpellation session on Oct. 23, Ko apologized for his earlier words, rather than engaging in deeper reflection on the idea that he could use the city government’s powers to interfere with the freedom of artistic expression.

The incident has highlighted the inconsistent standards of some politicians.

Yu, who strongly criticized Mei’s work in the exhibition, served as chief secretary to the Taipei

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Department of Information and Tourism during former mayor Hau Lung-bin's (郝龍斌) administration, including in 2014, when the museum held a show of Mei's works, "Wanted Dean-E Mei: A Retrospective," which included I-den-ti-ty.

However, the piece did not attract any strong criticism from Yu then.

I wonder what city councilor Yu — who strongly criticized the museum and asked "whose position" its art represented — would have said to chief secretary Yu in 2014, when she was a member of city's marketing system.

Did this "controversial" work of art mean that the Hau administration was also trying to "aggravate the hatred?"

If so, "whose position" did that represent?

The fact that Ko has echoed the CCP's regime with his claim that "the two sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one family" and said that he would give Lin a demerit demonstrates his belief that government can use censorship to silence the freedom of artistic expression, which in the end might destroy that expression.

The truth is that Ko's administration has suppressed the public's freedom of participation in many art events that were purportedly "free."

During the 2017 Nuit Blanche in Taipei's Gongguan (公館) area, many groups promoting the preservation of cultural assets such as Jiahe New Village (嘉禾新村) and former minister of national defense Yu Ta-wei's (俞大維) residence took part in the event as a "soft" protest against Ko's administration.

However, these groups were obstructed by several staff members of the event curator, BIAS Architects & Associates, which is led by Tammy Liu (劉巧玲), who was involved in a plagiarism

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dispute in connection to the Hsinchu Monster (怪獸) piece at this year's Taiwan Design Expo.

The staffers surrounded members of these groups and pushed them around in an attempt to prevent the public's freedom to rationally express their opinion.

At the 2018 Nuit Blanche in the Taipei Expo Park, the Ko administration sent large numbers of police officers to closely monitor participants and performers.

For this year's Nuit Blanche in Nangang District (南港) on Oct. 3, Ko sent police with long poles to the venue, fearing protests from groups supporting preservation of the Nangang Bottle Cap Factory, because he had not kept his promise to "fully preserve the whole factory area."

Given his record of talking about freedom while simultaneously suppressing the freedom of artistic expression, Ko's comment that the city could use its powers to interfere with the freedom of artistic expression is perhaps not so surprising.

Ko blames his administration's low approval rating on "the standard of Taipei residents still lagging behind."

Given the I-den-ti-ty dispute, when Ko — the mayor of the nation's capital — is willing to cooperate with city councilors to use the government's powers to suppress the freedom of artistic expression, how can we expect Taipei residents to increase their respect for that freedom and build the "glorious city" that values "freedom, diversity, and openness" that Ko likes to talk about?

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Translated by Lin Lee-kai

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