

Art as a Way to Freedom

Reflections on the 2025 Chiayi International Art Doc Film Festival

At 12 years old, a child begins the journey into adolescence. Since its inception in 2014, the Chiayi International Art Doc Film Festival (CIADFF) has faced many challenges: overcoming severe budget cuts, reclaiming audiences lost to streaming platforms and short-form videos, and enduring the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic when international filmmakers could not travel. Now, in 2025, the festival marks its 12th year — a symbolic coming-of-age and the beginning of a new chapter.

This year's theme, *As Lonely As Who*, inspired by a Hollywood romance title, prompts reflection. What is loneliness's connection to art documentaries? The festival delves into the intersections and tensions among art, humanity, and technology. Through a diverse selection of art documentaries from Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas, especially in the featured sections Digital Future and Camera Generativa, audiences are invited to confront a pressing question: how do we face and navigate the alienation and disconnection that technology often brings into human relationships? In 2018, the UK appointed a Minister for Loneliness. Japan recognizes *kodokushi*— “lonely death” — and has agencies dedicated to addressing it. While most creatures die alone, humans, as social beings, have long depended on community. That fabric is fraying under the relentless evolution of technology. With AI sweeping society like a tidal wave and social detachment becoming the new norm, *One Man's Bible* is no longer fiction, but reality. As humans grow more isolated, art may offer a path to redemption. True freedom is the absence of a need for safety, and art can guide us toward that freedom.

Content Is the Soul of Creation

My passion for film and theater manifests in simple pleasures. I sit quietly in a cinema or theater, enjoying the images and performances on the screen or stage. I'm not drawn to technology, but I'm intrigued by what it can do when used for artistic

expression — how far it can push our senses and imagination. *White Cloud*, a fully AI-generated film by director Emmanuel Van der Auwera, explores this potential. Using generative imagery, the film opens new cinematic territory by focusing on miners in Inner Mongolia's Bayan Obo Mining District — men struggling to survive in a bleak, sunless world. The narration comes from the miners themselves, their words honed through the grind of daily life. These men work underground in deadly conditions, meeting hardship with a silent, stoic resilience that tugs at the heartstrings. The artificial visuals strangely harmonize with their raw, human voices. There is no sense of disconnect. The surreal AI-generated imagery does not diminish the emotional power of their lived experience. One passage from their prose stays with me:

“It's still me,

On different nights,

Doing the same things,

Following shooting stars beneath the surface.”

Ultimately, content is the soul of creation. With innovative ideas and thoughtful use of AI and digital tools, form can be made to serve content, magnifying both the scope and depth of artistic expression.

AI builds on the accumulated knowledge, skills, and abilities of humanity. Yet, it cannot replicate everything: the agility of the human body, the mystery of human emotion, the richness of sensory experience, and the embodiment of lived memory. These remain powerful tools for the artist. Performance art, for example, brings the living human body into direct interaction with its audience, and that is something irreplaceable. In *To Return / Time Monads: The Echoes of Dionysus*, performance artist Chao Shih-chen creates a four-hour work (a condensed one-hour art doc version was screened), fusing the physical, historical, and political. He narrates his

artistic manifesto, slices a suit into ribbons, suspends the fabric and symbolic objects by threads, and orchestrates their descent to strike ceramic cups with ringing, resonant chimes. This creative act springs from emotional depth, artistic intention, and painstaking precision. It is the artist's response and challenge to technology. Through reflection, dialogue, and questioning, we push the boundaries of both art and technology, ushering them forward into a new era together.

Body as a Performance Artist's Weapon

In early March, I visited National Chiayi University to promote the CIADFF. There, I attempted to offer a few working definitions of "art documentary." Perhaps the one that comes closest to my own view is from film scholar Sing Song-yong: "To let a film inspired by real life reveal the very process through which life forms." Two films in this year's lineup capture this idea perfectly.

One of them is *Face the Earth*, a highlight of the festival and one of Huang Mingchuan's most significant works. What struck me most—an image etched into memory—was not a dramatic spectacle, but the damaged and vulnerable face of artist Chin Chih Yang, marred by illness and pain. In those scenes of medical treatment, he is simply a suffering human being. And it is precisely this shared human condition that sharpens the impact of his work: using his ailing body to reflect the grave pollution of the Earth. His resolve transcends physical suffering, turning disease into both an inner and outer metaphor. Huang Mingchuan does not mythologize the artist or his creative process. What we see is rare in Taiwanese art documentaries: honesty and unflinching clarity.

Another notable work is *Nam June Paik: Moon is the Oldest TV*, directed by Amanda Kim. Born into a wealthy Korean family and trained in music history and composition, Nam June Paik embraced leftist values, cut ties with his privileged background, and was ultimately blacklisted by his homeland. Nam June Paik was not

just an artist but also an inventor and electrical engineer. Using technology as his primary medium, he became a trailblazer in video art and predicted, decades ago, the world of satellites, fiber optics, and wireless communication we know today. New York—the “Big Apple”—was, for him, a lonely place. A Korean immigrant in a foreign land, he used his body and others’ in daring performances that pushed every limit. His story is far more than a tale of artistic triumph—it’s a radical life of resistance and reinvention through art.

Technology and Science as Both Form and Content

One of the standout features of the Chiayi International Art Doc Film Festival is its broad range of forums that go beyond film to explore various art forms, including fine arts, theater, short films, dance, staged photography, and more. This inclusive approach expands the thematic scope while allowing for more nuanced discussion. This year, two of the three main forums focused on technology: Globalized Technology and Art and Technology & Visual Media. These conversations made it clear that technology and science are not just tools or methods for creation. They are reshaping how stories are told and how artistic expression takes shape, fundamentally transforming the way visuals are made and experienced. When technology becomes not just the medium but also the message—when form and content merge—they unlock new levels of human creativity and our collective imagination for the future.

A High Point in the History of Taiwanese Advertising Art

The final forum, The Artistry of Television Advertising, featured two influential directors: Chen Hong-yi, who in the 1990s directed commercials for Stimorol and Sunrise Department Store while working with Ideology Advertising Agency Limited,

and Lo Ching-jen, known for his mastery of drama-driven storytelling in advertising. Together, they delved into how commercials can serve as powerful vessels for both visual artistry and narrative expression.

Chen Hong-yi speaks with deliberate calm — his thoughtful pauses are part of his signature rhythm, as if each word must pass through just one more layer of reflection. His creative instincts push against convention, breaking free from typical visual frameworks. In contrast, Lo Ching-jen is sharp and articulate, infusing his commercials with dramatic flair and emotional depth. With well-crafted narratives, he pulls the audience right into the heart of the story. Both directors are masterful visual storytellers, yet their methods couldn't be more different. To put it in cinematic terms: Chen Hong-yi's work leans toward the avant-garde, while Lo Ching-jen's shines in dramatic storytelling.

In the late 1980s, around the lifting of martial law in Taiwan, Ideology Advertising Agency Limited released a series of groundbreaking commercials. Among the most memorable were those for Stimorol chewing gum, with lines like "I have something to say" and "The cat has passed out on the piano." These uniquely creative combinations of sound and imagery have left an indelible mark on a generation's memory. While audiences at the time may not have fully grasped the bold and avant-garde audio-visual style, the rigid party-state ideology and entrenched political doctrines were beginning to loosen. Within the highly commercial medium of television advertising, commercial directors carved out a gutsy new path, reaching an artistic peak in Taiwan's advertising history.

In an era that was still relatively repressive and closed-off, television commercials — widely distributed and viewed — proved that commercial media could be radically inventive. In an interview last year with Funscreen Weekly, Chen Hong-yi reflected on his current creative journey:

“These days, I’ve been working on another documentary. I needed the process of making a documentary to pull me out of my usual routines and help me rethink what images and storytelling really are. What I want is for documentaries to engage with society — not just exist for screenings. They should serve other purposes as well.”

Chen Hong-yi’s current documentary deals with justice in urban renewal. Through extensive interviews with affected residents, he observed that those who speak out most often are women. Similarly, the documentary A2-B-C — named after the classification system for thyroid abnormalities — depicts the struggles of children in Fukushima a year and a half after the nuclear disaster. Almost all the voices we hear are mothers actively exposing government cover-ups, while fathers tend to remain silent, sometimes even opposing their wives’ decision to speak publicly about their children’s illnesses.

In Taiwan’s recent wave of legislative recall campaigns, women have also made up the majority of core volunteers. Historically marginalized and relatively silent (as well as silenced), women are now breaking stereotypes and raising their voices in movements for justice and political reform. This is an encouraging trend, a response to the #MeToo movement, and a fertile subject for social and gender studies.

Polish Short Film Masterpieces

To close, I want to spotlight Poland and its short films. For many of us, our connection to Poland begins through literature and cinema. One of the lines closest to my heart comes from Nobel Prize-winning poet Wisława Szymborska: “I prefer conquered to conquering countries.” Poland suffered tremendously during World War II, invaded first by Nazi Germany and then by the Soviet Union. Even today, it upholds a moral commitment among small nations, supporting its war-torn neighbor, Ukraine. One of the most unforgettable short films from this year’s festival was *Like All the Others*, produced by the Warsaw Film School. Its writing, performance,

cinematography, sound design, and music were all of exceptional quality. Director Max Bommas, only 24 years old, already demonstrates extraordinary command of the cinematic language. The film reflects on the final days of World War II and the madness of National Socialism. A soldier, trapped in a bunker facing off with Soviet forces, struggles to escape and reunite with his lover. Having lived under the shadow of communist totalitarianism for nearly half a century, Eastern European cinema does not shy away from confronting its political and historical traumas—a quality that Taiwanese filmmakers could learn from. The film's most striking feature is its music, which draws on Schubert's *Winterreise*, the iconic German-Austrian song cycle. The final piece, "The Hurdy-Gurdy Man," weaves through the entire film—sung live on set, played with simple instrumentation, or reimagined through subtle variations. Its stark, poetic resonance lingers hauntingly. By invoking one of the greatest song cycles of the German repertoire, the film finds a powerful echo for its themes of loneliness and perseverance — fueled by love, art, or any conviction worth holding.

An art documentary festival is not meant to be some distant, untouchable cloud in the sky. It comes down to earth and firmly plants itself on solid ground, making itself accessible to the people. Through images, sound, words, and forums, it reflects the many facets of society. This is precisely what makes the Chiayi International Art Doc Film Festival so remarkable and inspiring.

To walk the edges, to look the center in the eye — without arrogance, without deference. That is integrity. It is a path both people and art documentary film festivals can choose to take.