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tracing the transnational degrees of interactivity

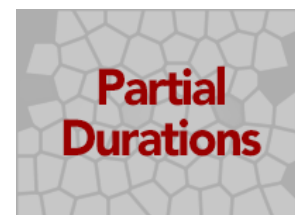
joelle jacinto: world symposium on global encounters in south-east asian performing arts



On the Road Again, Cai Ying, courtesy Bangkok University



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ONE OF THE TASKS OF THE WORLD SYMPOSIUM ON GLOBAL ENCOUNTERS IN SOUTH-EAST ASIAN PERFORMING ARTS, WHICH RECENTLY TOOK PLACE IN BANGKOK, WAS TO BRING TO THE SURFACE THE TRANSNATIONAL SOUTH-EAST ASIAN ARTIST. AS THE INTERNET HAS SUCCEEDED IN BRINGING CIVILISATIONS CLOSER TO EACH OTHER, IT IS INTERESTING TO FIND WHERE AND HOW SOUTH-EAST ASIAN PERFORMING ART POSITS ITSELF IN AN UNDENIABLE WAVE OF MODERNISATION AND GLOBALISATION.

The papers presented at the conference displayed these preoccupations, as in the research of Parichat Jungwiwattanaporn on the work of Pichet Klunchun; Bethany Collier, who noted contemporary methods for the new generation learning the Balinese Arja; Miguel Escobar Varela on using hip hop music with the Wayang Kulit; Shreyosi Mukherjee looking at a Malaysian Mak Yong adaptation of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream; William Petersen, who is enchanted with the contemporary aspect of the otherwise traditionally Tagalog senakulo; and, among many others, Tiffany Strawson recounting her first-hand experience of learning the masked dance topengpajegan. However, in the symposium performances Asian theatre maintained its traditional veneer.

Bangkok University's Communication Arts Complex provided diverse choices of venues for performances. Traditional performances, including a charming Cantonese opera and the Balinese Barong-Rangda dance, were staged in the amphitheatre in the centre of the complex. Shadow puppet plays and three-hour heavy dramas were held in auditoriums. All the drop-in installations were located in small and medium-sized studios.

plant me a word

Patricia Correa, from Portugal, presented Plant Me a Word, which required little movement, in a small, carpeted room. Seated at a small wooden desk with her feet planted in a pot of soil, Correa looks around the room and invites a spectator to sit before her. Once seated, that person becomes part of the work. Correa immediately hands them a leaf and instructs them to "plant me a word" on it. Any word will do, it seems—she puts the entire leaf in her mouth, chews and swallows, all the while maintaining intense eye contact.

The onlooker wonders about the significance of the pot of soil, and what could happen

if you asked Correa a question or kept her from putting the leaf in her mouth, or whether the leaves and ink might eventually poison her. But as she scans the room for the next participant, curiosity is replaced by terror—split-second terror of having to join in the work and forfeiting your position as audience. Whatever her objectives, Correa's attempt to take the audience out of their comfort zone and into the work itself was quite successful over its three-day duration. The audience appeared to be helping her to 'grow' with the words they planted. There was no exchange of ideas; the work was a push to get ideas and words out of her participants' bodies, to take root and grow with the tree that is Correa.

drawing your attention

Liesje van den Berk (Netherlands) set up a room in which lights hit a glass wall so that she could 'draw' the shadows of those who came to view her installation. She moves quickly, outlining the shifting, shadowy figures. Van den Berk also seems to simultaneously respond to guitarist Jeen Gert Rabs' soundscape.

The point of Drawing Your Attention is not the finished product, though Van den Berk, primarily a visual artist, is definitely interested in that as well. Its value resides in the performance. The audience members whose shadows are being drawn on the wall are instantly performers, some accommodating Van den Berk by posing, so that she has more interesting shapes to outline.

thai tracings



Thai Tracings, Sarah Rubidge
photo courtesy Bangkok University

At a Western conference, a new media panel would be bursting at the seams. However, the one in this symposium attracted only minimal attendance, while most participants were at the "Traditional Performance in a Changing World" panel conducted in the next room. South-East Asia is only starting to discover new media, as evidenced by the papers and performances presented.

The new media panel keynote speaker Sarah Rubidge (UK) discussed the progress of digital media in the development of contemporary dance. She provided a more intimate view of these digital trends with her installation, Thai Tracings. Images of classical Thai dancers were projected onto the walls of the studio, sometimes against an aerial view of Bangkok's cityscape. To further blur the boundary between classical and contemporary, there were intervals where a live-feed of members of the audience standing in the room was projected on a screen beside the classical dancer.

With the recognition that the viewers are now part of the work, the screen presents the audience-performance relationship in its purest form, spectator and spectacle side by side on one panel. But once the realisation sets in, the dynamic is changed, by varying degrees: delight, fright, feigned disaffection. Some, interestingly, start to dance along with the projections, doing the same traditional movement but in street clothes.

on the road again

In Hong Kong choreographer Cai Ying's On the Road Again, the performers move around the audience seated on the studio floor, interacting with them such that they become part of the performance and some of their reactions dictate the action. After circling the room holding carry-on luggage, the choreographer and her dancers stuff their clothes with travel pillows and melt into lethargy, as if turning into the pillows themselves. The performance is based on the artist's dreams about the many journeys

she's taken. At the end, the dancers run out of the studio, leaping across a field we can see through the window and beckoning us to join them (we didn't).

a mask for a shadow puppet

Hanuman Meets His Father is an elaborate Wayang theatre experiment where the shadow puppet play and the masked dance drama occur on the same stage. It was quite electrifying when the masked actor playing Hanuman suddenly leapt onto the stage from behind the screen of shadows—the last thing you'd expect, and yet it did not feel out of place. The scholars studying Indonesian theatre were astounded and immediately wanted to know how older generations of theatre practitioners might react. The Wayang Theatre of Bali has yet to perform this for the locals, but is optimistic.

Perhaps to Western practitioners, this may not seem as groundbreaking as it does to South-East Asian artists. Informed by a strong sense of tradition and yet reeling from the effects of colonialism, South-East Asians have the burden of bridging the gap between past and present, between where they live and where they can practice their art. Just how they'll get there will be interesting in practice, and as a topic for a future conference.

World Symposium on Global Encounters in South-East Asian Performing Arts: Plant Me a Word, concept, performer Patricia Correa, Feb 1-3; Drawing Your Attention, visual artist, concept, performer Liesje van den Berk, music Jeen Gert Rabs, Feb 1-3; Thai Tracings, concept, digital execution Sarah Rubidge, Feb 1-3; On the Road Again, choreographer Cai Ying, Feb 1; Hanuman Meets His Father, director I Wayan Dibia, performers the Wayang Theater, Bangkok University, Thailand, Feb 3

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