

# City Odysseys: Loosing and Lost

Date: 2004.3.20~5.23

Location: Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts

Curator: Hsu, Su-Chen

Artists: Peng Hung-Chih, Liu Shih-Fen, Hung Yi-Ju

Theatre Groups: Shakespeare's Wild Sisters Group, Riverbed Theatre

## Curatorial discourse

By Hsu Su-Chen

The body is the subtlest and most refined container for sensing this world. Like a draft full of water vapor, it can absorb, perform osmosis, and explore the sea of interpersonal relationships. And like a novel, it has recorded the unique story of every age. Freedom and liberation are like dangling bait and like pages of a daily log that will never be lost. People carry the body with them, display their transition with it, and together with it flow into all kinds of extraordinary forms.

### 【1】

In the 17th century, William Harvey (1578-1657) suggested that the circulation of blood could promote the healthy growth of human organs and tissues. His findings gave inspiration to urban infrastructure designers who regarded the city as an organic being. For the centuries that followed, this concept has influenced city planning—the far-reaching transportation network is compared to the blood circulation system as residents travel freely and continuously through the busy streets like the cells in blood vessels.

With the daily conveniences brought about by information technology and biotechnology, humans in the modern society are now experiencing more freedom and liberation than ever. Nowadays, embryos can survive out of their mothers' wombs, and humans can travel in space or navigate in the virtual world. Given the "freedom from resistance" created by engineers, people are now freer and more liberated than the blood cells that travel in veins, to the point of being adrift.

These technological advancements have brought significant changes which people perceive not virtually but physically to acquire unprecedented experiences. When getting used to modern conveniences, high-speed data transmission and sensational media content, urban residents are trapped by the necessity of going faster and are overwhelmed by the desire of more freedom at the price of losing sensitivity toward their surroundings and innermost feelings. Their unawareness of this change has blunted their feelings and compassion toward others, reducing their connections with their surroundings and the people around them into nothing more than the mere snapshots of digital cameras, which can be taken and erased at will.

These factors give a new image to our human existence: people are drifting around, instead of simply moving. The urban environment gives momentum to diversity and individualism; it breaks the absolute dichotomy and gives birth to languages of more flexibility. The concept "defensive de-stimulation" proposed by sociologist Erving Goffmann can best illustrate the characteristics of the modern

urban condition: movement, speed, detachment and passiveness.

These fragmental and inconsistent mental experiences are the direct consequences of the city design. Drifting can be positively interpreted as unlimited freedom but on the other hand, uprootedness can be regarded as a tragic result of instability. When disconnected from their surroundings and senses, people are disoriented in excessive physical pleasure and isolated from one another, therefore becoming more susceptible to frictions and conflicts.

Inevitably, modern artists are more sensitive to the drifting in the living environment and human behaviors and try to express these fragmental physical and mental experiences in their works. Diversity has become a vital issue in human life. However, has the juxtaposition of different races, languages, genders, cultures and many other things in the society inspired the melting of elements "different from self" or actually has it deepened the differentiation and indifference among people instead? Has diversity shortened the physical distances or widened the chasms in human interaction in the end? The inevitable conflict between the external experiences of urban life and the inner sensitivity of art creations has fueled modern art making. The conflict between the inner world and the external one is a topic that all the participating artists in this exhibition wanted to explore.

## 【II】

In this exhibition, named "City Odysseys: Loosing and Lost," visual artists and performance groups from both Taiwan and the United States were invited to deliver five unprecedented works combining visual presentation and performance in the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts (KMFA). Each work was an attempt to interpret the mystical and mysterious connections between humans and urban space, one of the major themes of this exhibition.

Provided by Shakespeare's Wild Sisters Group, the first work, "Zodiac in Developing," was the third version of their original work "Zodiac." This work was an extension of the site-specific principle of its two antecedents—a principle of modifying the performance according to the structural and functional attributes of the site. In the performance, Director Wang Chia-ming adds the video and audio clips of the two previous works, transcending the traditional methods of expression in realistic theater.

Facing the new challenges of staging this performance at the KMFA, Huang Yi-ju, set designer, came up with a solution by dividing the whole play into four scenes at different places so that the audience was constantly moving and changing. His experiment with storytelling through stage settings created a new relationship between the audience and a stage without the actors and actresses. Through a telephone line that transmits the narrations of the actors, the audience can put pieces of the puzzles together to get a clear picture of the murder.

Even with the theme revolving around an abnormal and hair-raising murder, "Zodiac in Developing" is a play which ingeniously applies different representational mechanisms of both theater and media, inspiring thoughts about how the "truth" is manipulated by the media and performance art. Through the plot structure and pre-recorded content, this work constructs a world where actors and actresses move in and out of virtuality and reality, past and future, presence and absence, as well as object and illusions. Mirroring modern life where the indescribable violence of media and images are pervasive, this work incorporates the audience as conspirators for they have grown addicted to observing the cruel murder, and turning the whole theater (even the city) into a gigantic and invisible crime scene.

The second work is "Little Danny--Made in Austria" by Peng Hung-chih. Peng is an artist who transcends questions of identity and race by comparing the human condition into the connection between humans and dogs. This work, a 4.5-meter "monument" in the shape of a dachshund, was produced in Austria by assembling many toy puppies made in Mainland China. Connected by a central control electronic device, these puppies will set off barking together when any audience triggers the device. The work causes reflexive reactions, such as surprise, amazement or amusement among the audience and puts the audience in the receiving end of stimuli instead.

Just as Peng always does in his other works, this Danny completely reverses the relationship between humans (the audience) and dogs (the work) and humans are reduced to mere passive receivers. Even without actual reconstructions of the exhibition site, Peng still successfully ushers the audience into a virtual stage that dismisses the preposterous influence of commercialism around the world.

In addition to Peng's Brobdingnag-like canine work, viewers can find brand new experiences in Liu Shih-fen's "6° K." Walking through the enclosed passageway to view the work, viewers can experience traveling through an endoscopic tube to look at what is inside the artist's body. With the endoscopic images or the 404 images synthesized by computer-based photographs of 101 people's faces, Liu's work can create tension by merging the three elements of images, audience and space.

When watching the endoscopic images, viewers might feel uneasy and nervous from being watched by the faces on both sides of the passage. Synthesized with parts of different faces, these images symbolize what Liu describes as "...the anxiety and uncertainty caused by primitive messages surging beneath the complicated human connections when people gather in the city."

Using the KMFA's existing exhibition mechanisms, the Riverbed Theater presents two works that combine a museum exhibition with a play-within-a-play. The director and playwright Craig Quintero presented a play based on a true story of an American director who passed away in 1975. In this play, he used the works provided by the CA Tinquero Foundation to build up a documentary-like exhibition and multiple spaces in and out of the theater. The premiere of "Headless in Los Angeles" is also based on the fictional work by CA Tinquero.

"CA Tinquero: The Theatre Collection," was an application of the KMFA's specific contextual symbols to blur the distinction between the virtual world and reality, arts and non-arts, theater and fine arts, as well as life and performance. This play, based on a fictional play, is an exploration of not only theatrical aesthetics but also the anxiety of modern people when facing the fast changing alternation of virtuality and reality. Following the investigator in the play, we will also face the unlimited possibilities of truth, which the keys C A Tinquero left will unlock.

In addition to his participation in the work by Shakespeare's Wild Sisters Group, Huang Yi-ju also provided his own work in this exhibition. Displayed in the passageways leading to the above-mentioned four works, Huang's "Artificial Light" series feature phantom-like bodies slumping in the back seats of vehicles, symbolizing a voyage without a starting point or an end.

### 【III】

In addition to the exhibited art, another focus of this exhibition was the space design and management of the KMFA's fourth floor. First of all, such a design can allow the realization of the artists' concepts and perceptions and further stimulate

more intense resonance among viewers. Second, when viewers participate in activities or watch performances in this space, they can freely cross the boundaries between exhibition/theater and audience/actors, making the attempt to categorize the arts as unnecessary and meaningless.

In this space, viewers are regarded as actors and actresses on stage and, therefore, the guiding paths for the viewer and the locations of the exhibited items are carefully designed in simulation of how actors and actresses move on stage and interact with the settings. The irregular band-shaped path, together with the connection by Huang's "Artificial Light" series, guided viewers through five unique worlds created by different artists. Moving from one exhibition room to another and viewing one work after another, viewers were more like reading through five different stories in a collection than merely paying a visit to the museum. In one room, viewers were like endoscopic capsules traveling through the intestines of the artist; in another, viewers were witnesses to a murder. The whole exhibition was like a book rich in twists and turns of plots along with abundant visual and audio contents, giving viewers unprecedented experiences.

During the exhibition period, the two theater groups will deliver seven performances. However, the preservation of the stage spaces and settings as they are is an important concept of this exhibition-in other words, to turn the stage into an exhibition. This concept poses a demanding challenge for each participating director and playwright for they have to convert a dynamic performance of 20 to 50 minutes into a two-month exhibition. In this exhibition, two performance groups and two individual visual artists were both invited to present their works. How they rendered the visual sense of liveliness in their works and what impact would their visual creations impose on performance and vice versa was something experimental in this exhibition and worthy of further observation.

#### 【IV】

The first half of the exhibition title, "City Odysseys" is named after the feelings shared among all the participating artists, while the other half, "Loosing and Lost," is a state of mind each artist has gone through. The goal of this exhibition was to create an art exhibition rich in uncertainty and originality. This exhibition was a combination of new possibilities wherein lies a new frontier of art creation that requires further exploration.

Just as inevitable as the trend of globalization, performance art and visual art, two types of arts of very similar natures, are now seeing a new relationship emerging between them. The combination of these two types of art is free from any rule or boundary, unpredictable and open to any kind of possible implementations. All the unexpected results caused by the interactions among different creation elements and events gradually emerged in this exhibition.

(英譯：謝明學／Translated by Scott Hsieh)