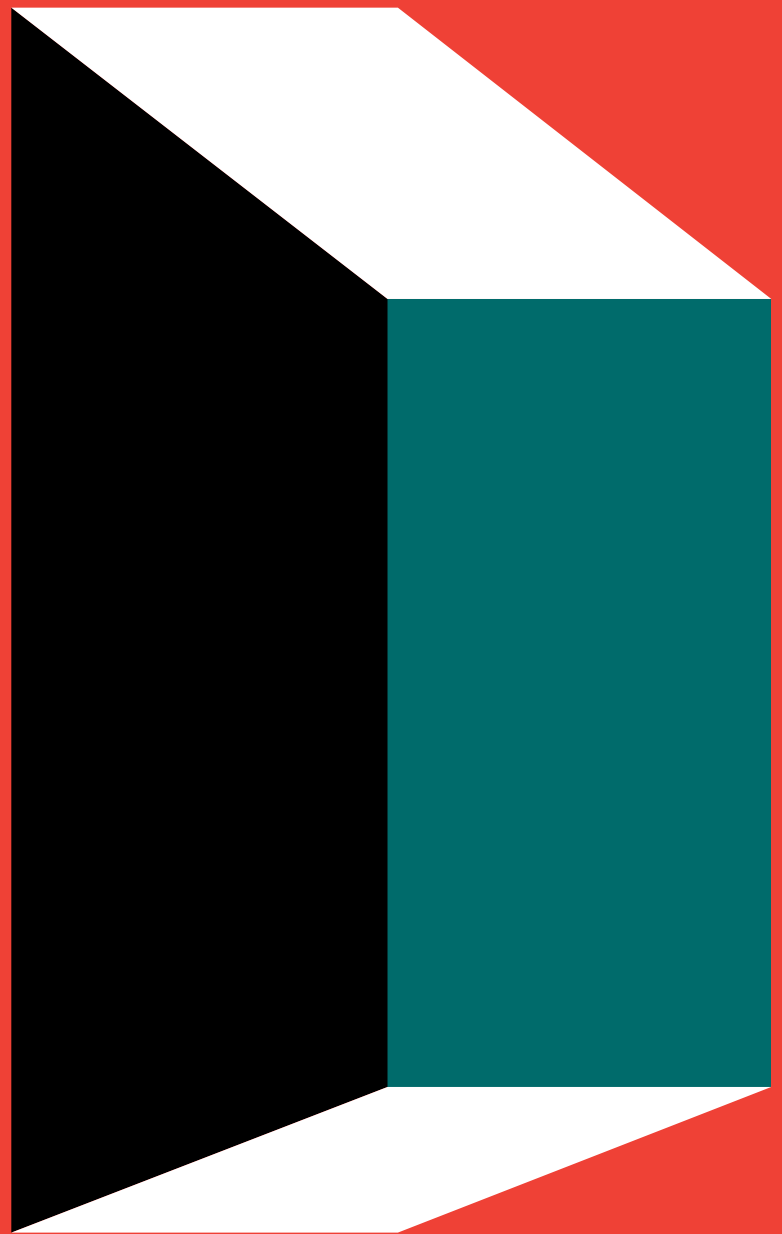
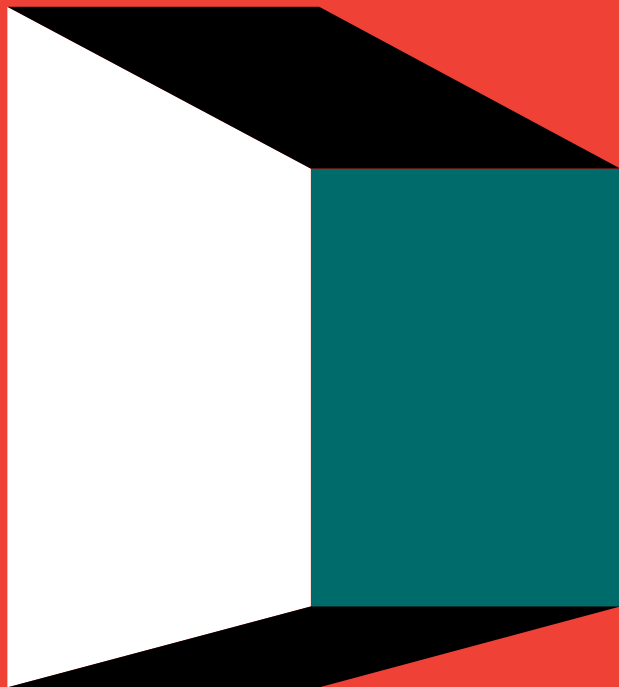
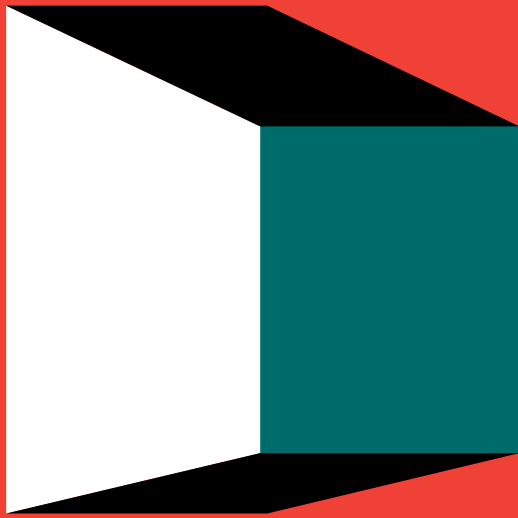


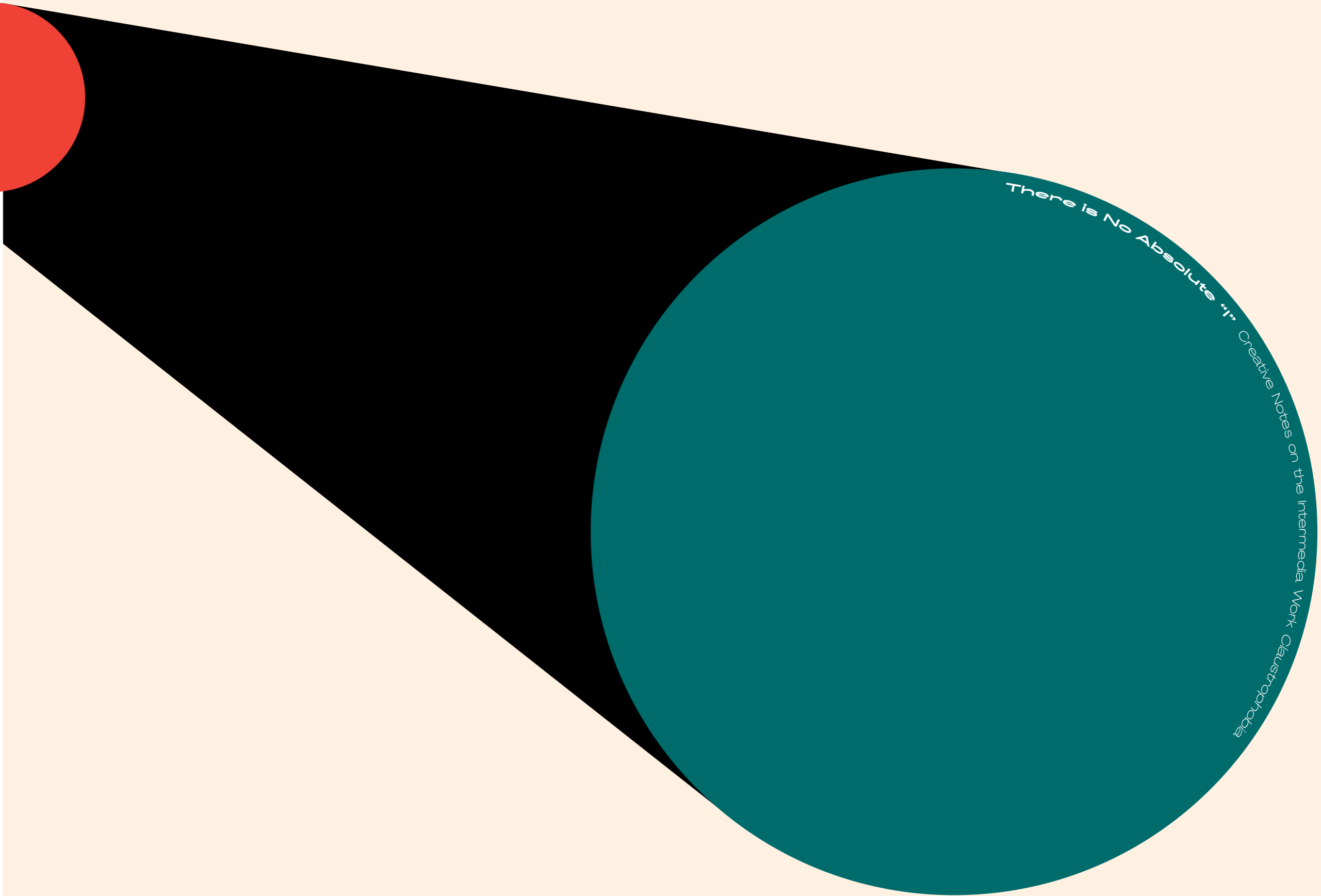
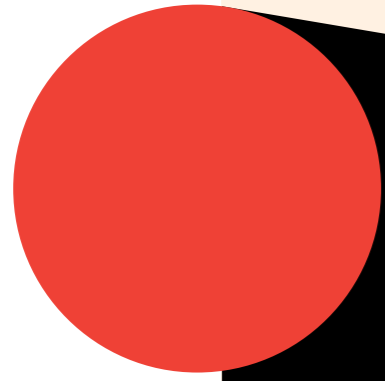
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Hong Kong  
Drama  
Overview

2017  
2018





There is No Absolute "I" Creative Notes on the Intermedia Work Claustrophobia

## There is No Absolute “I”

### Creative Notes on the Intermedia Work *Claustrophobia*

Text  
Vee Leong

*Claustrophobia* (2017) is an intermedia work that takes its point of departure in the joining of three different media: visual arts, sonic arts and performing arts. It began with a proposition raised by creative producer Orlean Lai: Is it possible for artists to employ media other than their usual ones to conceive of and create a work of art, and to work together in doing so?

At the beginning, Orlean, visual artist Tam Wai-ping and I worked on developing the concept based on Ivy Ho’s eponymous film. (The project had evolved from a previously shelved idea of adapting the film into a stage version.) Very soon we came to grasp the content and form that we wanted to develop: the creation of multiple perspectives through space, and the reshaping of time through multiple perspectives. The paradox of “claustrophobia-intimacy” that had originated from the film gave birth to a new set of concepts, that of “concealment and disclosure”. It had been certain from the start that each audience member was to be given a pair of headphones. Seated in a way that was not so different from an ordinary theatre setting, headphone-bound audiences were to enter a private yet collective viewing experience, during which the parallel worlds of sight and hearing were to be co-inscribed on the audience an open text. Considering that I tried my hand at making sound work in Orlean’s curatorial project, *Zoo As Metaphor* (2014), it is no coincidence that this work is heavily inclined towards sound.

At that point, Orlean brought in sound designer, Yuen Cheuk-wa, as well as Sham Chung-tat, Jaycee Kwok and George Lou. Together they formed an outstanding team of sound designers and engineers that was much larger than the usual one for a theatre production. We worked together closely regarding research and development (How does sound tell stories? What is the nature of the subjectivity of listening?); technical and acoustic setting (What are the layers we can produce inside and outside of the ear pads, and with different contents playing in alternate seats?); sonic writing (How to weave spoken words, music and sound into two 50-minute soundtracks to create a sensory journey into interiority?); and the voice performance and recording of the text. We agreed that before the rehearsals started, 80 percent of both soundtracks had to have been completed.

The soundtracks would become the original text for the rehearsals, in the same way choreography requires a piece of music to spark the first move.

Meanwhile, the writing of another text was also in full gear. Tam had decided that the “split-room” installation was going to be dismantled as time progressed, to reflect a gradual concealment/disclosure of the artist’s interiority. In the artist’s own words, the room is a “philosophical space”. In fact, I witnessed a series of intimate and honest (self-)dialogues between Tam and his installation, which manifested in its own right an exceptional aesthetic magnitude and maturity. During that time, the installation and the sonic writing worked independently. Or rather, it was me who deliberately separated the making of the two to allow mysterious coincidences and conflicts to come about—when the artists were free from being “exhaustively responsive” to each other—before the parallel worlds were finally put together.



*Claustrophobia* (2017) — Photo: Ming Photo courtesy: orleanlaiproject

We found ourselves in a very playful situation: As soon as the rehearsals started, I seemed to work in the manner of a post-production editor, juxtaposing the installation time-line with that of the soundtracks, trimming “offbeats” and extending “accents” as the two sets of narratives progressed in parallel, making room for “solos” or at times a two-part “forte singing”. It also reminded me of the act of composing piano music, where scores are written for both “hands” to play together. What Marguerite Duras investigated in her films—the sound-image relationship, the separation of voices

and their speakers, the mutual cancellation of sounds and the spoken word—were explored in this work. We were tempted to take a closer look at the intriguing process of meaning-making and the realm of non-seeing that Duras and her contemporaries adventured through.

As soon as the two-part structure composed of the installation and the soundtracks came into shape, we started to work on the libretto for this piece of “music”. The so-called libretto was in fact the live actions of the performers on stage. It was finally time for the visual aspect to play a bigger part. In fact, the installation defined very clearly the essence and atmosphere on stage, and it was of utmost importance that the live actions spoke the same tone and dynamics as the installation. The challenges for the performers also lay in finding the right kind of “truth” on stage. Was the truth manifested in corporeality, or was it of a symbolic nature? Was it dramatic? Or was it about materials, or presence?

What we tried to investigate in the rehearsal room with performers Ong Yong-lock, Chan Kong-hung, Emily Ng and Ivy Pang, was perhaps a kind of vigour that could aptly carry both the visible and the invisible, definiteness and ambiguity. This was made possible by our performers who were willing to spend time experiencing the installation and the soundscape simply as an audience, which opened up their connections with the imaginary and the sensory that both worlds evoked. As German theatre director Heiner Goebbels once said: “The first question of an actor who works with me, is therefore not: ‘Where do I come from?’ or ‘Who am I?’ but: ‘What has to happen on stage?’”<sup>1</sup> Here we might add: “What is this stage I am on?” and “What is the sense of existence it gives birth to?” In the rehearsal room, I employed landscape and interior paintings to situate the performers at the delicate juncture between motion and stillness. Costume and image designer Trista Ma suggested the bold use of materials that helped create stronger dynamics and performative elements. Clad in green leaves and black cloths, the performers were turned into a form of “soft sculpture”. This also inspired Tam and me in terms of the mise-en-scène and the use of objects.

Those moments are intensely fulfilling even as they come back to my mind now. Our experiences were filled with an incredible amount of conviction, courage, trust and sparkling moments. Such an expansive process was the result of time and dedication.

<sup>1</sup> Heiner Goebbels. 2015. “If I Want An Actor to Cry: I Give Him An Onion: On working with actors”, *Aesthetics of Absence: Texts on Theatre*, pp.82. Oxon: Routledge.

That said, the move-in week took us back to reality. This work was highly demanding in terms of technical set-up and testing. The usual four-and-a-half-day move-in schedule was not at all sufficient. To save time the lighting designer Alice Kwong and deputy stage manager Mousey Tse worked almost non-stop—as well as the backstage crew members and the sound team who were responsible for setting up each of the 180 sets of headphones. Lighting, being most important visual element of a stage work, finally took shape at that moment. It had long been discussed how the installation should be lit. But it was only when Alice took all the fineness of chiaroscuro onto the actual canvas that we finally began to understand how it shone with the substance of time and space.

Last but not least, the strong experience and tremendous patience of production manager Kathy Ching was invaluable. Without it Tam’s installation could not have been erected in a theatre configuration. It might be challenging for visual artists like Tam to work with the conventions of theatre, but everyone in the team helped each other to overcome different challenges along the way.

Orlean once said: “To me, intermedia making is about exploring ways for artists to think in the ways of other artists.” If we evaluate *Claustrophobia* from this perspective, perhaps we did not achieve quite enough. Nevertheless, Orlean’s idea has become an important guiding principle in my own creative pursuit. Reading the reflections of Polish director Wojtek Ziemilski has also helped me to articulate the experience: “I prefer a director,” he says, “who is an organiser, makes decision at a time when a lot is going on; the ideas are coming from all over, the whole team is looking for something, and then one person decides. The director has one additional vote, but it is not a significant advantage. The director should be questioning and listening.”<sup>2</sup>

The title of this article, “There is no absolute ‘I’”, is borrowed from the review of *Claustrophobia* by filmmaker Jessey Tsang: “There is no absolute ‘I’ in this work; what we have are multiple storylines. Image and sound are put in sync, but at the same time each speaks on its own.”<sup>3</sup> Here, I am borrowing her words to describe how subjectivities meet in the creation of an intermedia work. These words project a vision of intermedia making at the same time.

<sup>2</sup> Wojtek Ziemilski, quoted from Anna R. Burzynska. 2018. “Between Art, Society, Representation, and Subjectivity: Wojtek Ziemilski’s *Prolog*”, Katia Arfara, Aneta Mancewiz, Ralf Remshardt eds. *Intermedial Performance and Politics in the Public Sphere*, pp.128. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>3</sup> Jessey Tsang. 2017. “This is Not a Flower”, *Delta Zhi*, issue 77, December 2017, pp.22-23.

Interestingly enough, while there is no absolute "I" in this work, "I" have made my most personal art piece in recent years.

I remember that while we were working on this production, Orlean and I were embarking on another collaborative work with yet another great group of artists. In a brainstorming meeting for *Zoo as Metaphor 2* (2018), Orlean introduced to us *The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.* (2017), which was co-created by writer and filmmaker Alexander Kluge, visual artist Thomas Demand, stage and set designer-cum-director Anna Viebrock, and curator Udo Kittelmann. The piece is more like a multi-layered art experience than an exhibition. I can imagine how liberating it was for the audience. *Claustrophobia* was also liberating for me as an author. If multimedia theatre allows the legacy of total theatre to live on, intermedia making in theatre may well be a rethinking about theatre (as a space, a medium, a way of seeing, and an institution). It opens up a wider range of definitions and searches for truths (rather than one absolute truth), through more than one kind of aesthetic experience, while it seeks to set us free.

#### Vee Leong

A former journalist, Vee Leong has been a writer-director of text-based and intermedia art making since 2010. She is based in Hong Kong, and her works have also been seen in Taiwan, the UK and recently in The Netherlands. Dedicated to the research and practice of contemporary form and politics of text-based theatre making, she has also developed an interest in sound-based and durational performances, investigating socially significant topics with an independent spirit and from a feminist perspective. Presented by On & On Theatre Workshop and orleanlaiproject, her works have appeared in the Hong Kong Arts Festival, the New Vision Arts Festival and the Manchester International Festival in recent years.