

香港舞蹈概述

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2017 **verview**

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香港舞蹈概述2017

Hong Kong Dance Overview 2017

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美術設計、排版	Felixism Creation
Graphic Design and Typeset	
出版 Publisher	Felixism Creation
網站 Website	http://www.danceresearch.com.hk/

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The Considerations of Organisers of Art Criticism Events: On the 'City Contemporary Dance Festival Chatbox Forum 2017'

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The first 'City Contemporary Dance Festival' (hereinafter referred to as CCDF) was organised by the 'City Contemporary Dance Company' (hereinafter referred to as CCDC) in 2017. In the 'Artistic Director's Message' of the programme guide titled 'The Feast of Asia Contemporary Dance',¹ Willy Tsao pointed out that many people's perception and impression of art festivals were limited to associations with international art events in Europe and America, and 'as the arts in Asia continue to flourish—from the development of industry professionals, allocation of resources, through to innovation of artistic creativity—the region has been gaining much in international recognition.' With CCDC's accumulated international network over the years, and the co-organisation of large-scale modern dance festivals with 'Guangdong Modern Dance Company' and 'Beijing Dance/LDTX' as foundation, CCDF aimed at 'strengthening international exchanges' and inter-sector networks, while providing a space for wider and further artistic developments for artists and audiences.

Consideration 1: Capital

In addition to focusing on production-related exchanges by artists, producers, and organisers, etc., the first CCDF also took the initiative to liaise with the International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong) to co-organise a symposium entitled 'Re-Imagining Dance in Asia'. The Association recommended and invited three dance critics from different regions to attend CCDF in Hong Kong and to speak in the symposium on the topic and the performances they saw. Given my role in the Association, I have often received invitations from different art festivals. I plan art criticism-related projects such as appreciation and thematic talks, forums, seminars, and art criticism writing workshops; organise and publish art criticism articles and exchanges, etc. before, during, and after the festivals, online and offline. However, it is not always that the Association participates 'in good faith'. Other than the feasibility of the implementation schedule, I pay more attention to whether those projects respond to the current situation of the local art criticism ecology.

By 'response' to the current 'needs' of the local art criticism ecology, I am definitely referring to something rather functional—such as the decline of conventional publishing and the shift towards online publishing, the lack of space and motivation for emerging art critics to continuously engage in criticism—the most apparent resources the art festival can make available, such as giving tickets to art critics, directly fill up such gaps. It is not necessarily a commitment on the part of the art festivals to the art criticism ecology. Benny Lim pointed out in 'Theatre Critics and Their Capital'² that the vision, experience, and knowledge of theatre critics

are their cultural and social capital. 'Festivals see this collaboration with critics as a fulfilment of their education mission, so as to better engage their audiences. For theatre critics, festivals become a valuable opportunity to build up additional social and economic capital. It is a win-win situation.' However, as organisers of art criticism events, how we can look beyond 'needs' and the provision of services, and strategically utilise these resources to break through the shackles of the current development of art criticism and create narrative possibilities, is even more challenging.

Undeniably, current large-scale international art festivals do not lack this piece of the puzzle (art criticism). However, the size of this piece of the puzzle and its location in the entire picture depend on how the art festival regards the function of art criticism: It can be to mobilise audience's attention, discussion and participation in different media, to make production visible and documented, to integrate art criticism into cultural discourse, or even to allow art critics to intervene into the structure or core planning of programmes of the art festival. From the perspective of marketing and public relations, art criticism is a double-edged sword with both pros and cons, though in fact this is not something that art critics and event organisers concern. When I participated in the round table forum 'Criticism for the Future' at the 2017 'Tainan Arts Festival', some art critics had criticised the festival's allocation of resources: the larger and more influential an art festival is, the more resources for 'moulding' and 'shaping' the art criticism narratives and discourses. This does not necessarily mean that art festivals

manipulate the opinions of art critics, or influence the professionalism and independence of art critics, instead the question is whether the deployment of these resources would lead art critics and their criticism towards a certain disposition. They may have been incorporated without being aware of that.

However, this is no longer an imaginative approach if art festivals intend to 'utilise' art criticism only in this way. What I am more interested in is how to use criticism as a vision and concept of organising, so that art festivals will generate stronger cultural and social capital to turn the manifestation of art festivals into a criticism that responds to the present, whether its humanistic phenomenon or artistic form. Keng Yi-wei has served as the artistic director of the 'Taipei Arts Festival' for six years. Every year, the theme and programme selection show an acutely critical curatorial approach, and a vision to discuss through a perspective. This also has something to do with Keng's being an active art critic himself. In an interview, he confessed that 'the function of an art festival must not stop at solely providing performances. "The sharing and practice of new concepts and systems, as well as the introduction of new appreciation methodologies, must also be achieved beyond the performances through lectures, workshops and other methods, even the creation of platforms."³ The 2017 'Taipei Arts Festival' had 'The City and Its Future' as its curatorial theme; while *Remote Taipei* by Rimini Protokoll from Germany was definitely a participatory production that re-examined and criticised the city through a perspective, *Minorities*, by 'using actors, actresses, and dancers from Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Europe',

Mainland Chinese choreographer Yang Zhen 'examines the situation of ethnic groups in his homeland and builds a bridge to the situation of migrants in Europe.'⁴ These programmes 'synchronized with the rest of the world'⁵ not merely in terms of the popularity of format and themes but also in terms of the organisers' strategy to develop discourses on certain topics. Another case in point is Germany's 'Berliner Festspiele'. It engages a jury composed of art critics and cultural journalists in the selection of ten German theatre performances of the year, where the perspective of criticism becomes the focus of discourse and the vision the art festival stands for. Instead of worrying about the dilemma of art criticism's involvement in art festivals and its integrity, one wonders if there might be a more progressive method to allow art festivals to evince the creativity of criticism.

Consideration 2: Resources

Every art festival indeed has its own framework for art criticism intervention, and of course the first CCDF is no exception. When I received the invitation, there was a consensus, such as both parties understood that resources would be limited. To achieve the aforementioned win-win situation with art criticism, in which the relationship between resources and capital accumulation is inextricably linked, what needs to be considered is the kind of events that would meet the CCDF's goal of 'strengthening international exchanges' while responding to the current local art criticism ecology. In the early stage of planning, I had proposed to hold the 'Young Critics Seminar' by the International Association of Theatre Critics, a collaborative

project between regional chapters and local art festivals. Young art critics recommended by each chapter are selected by the International Association to participate in workshops hosted by senior art critics, watch performances, write reviews and participate in forums. The 'Seminar for Young Critics' has been held all over the world for over 20 years but has never been hosted in Hong Kong before. As an art criticism project that combines education, training and exchange, the seminar can make the first CCDF more visible among international art critics and international art criticism platforms. In addition, it can promote exchange between local young art critics and international art critics. If organisation can be aligned with the proper topics, CCDF will become an energetic space for exchange.

Unfortunately, due to the limited number of dance critics to be invited, it would be more feasible to conduct a symposium featuring senior art critics, and 'Seminar for Young Critics' failed to happen. Yet even so, I tried my best with limited resources, when inviting dance critics, to widely consider their locality and the spectrum of their dance appreciation and criticism; whether they can initiate thinking and discussion in the dance festival with 'Asian Contemporary Dance' as the central axis of the programme. Under this premise, my suggestion was to invite Cecilia Djurberg, a theatre and dance critic from Sveriges Radio, who I met at the Congress of the International Association of Theatre Critics. Since participating in art criticism, she has been working online. The Nordic dance scene, where she is active in, is the latest hot field of creation and exchange. Never been to Hong Kong, she is both

curious about and distanced from Asia and would likely have many interesting views about Asian dance. Professor Pawit Mahasarinand, then Chairman of the Department of Dramatic Arts, Chulalongkorn University in Thailand, often visited Hong Kong ever since he was a child. In recent years he has visited many Chinese-speaking regions for cultural exchange events organised by universities and art and cultural organisations. Having studied in the United States, his idea of so-called eastern and Western cultures encompasses a fairly broad spectrum. He is also informed in dance and body cultures in different Asian regions. He indeed is an ideal candidate to unravel the Asian context. Taiwanese performing arts critic Liu Chun-liang is a cross-disciplinary artist who works in Taiwan and Australia and participates in overseas exchanges. Her works focus on sensory experience and the interaction with public spaces, which calls upon formal and aesthetic strategies very much discussed in the recent art criticism scene.

Of course, time is also a kind of resource. I had to take into consideration of how to effectively go into a 1.5-hour discussion in 'Re-imagine Dance in Asia' when the critics only stayed in Hong Kong for a few days, so that the three dance critics (one from Europe and two from Asia, one of which from a Chinese speaking region) with different cultural backgrounds could spark off discussions in context. That combination itself was the result of conscious deliberation. Art criticism-related discussions are usually 'fringe' events of art festivals. They are allowed limited time and often arranged at the end of the festivals. Although this symposium was not long, it took place soon after the middle part of

CCDF. Many participants, who were artists yet to depart, exchanged their perspectives, despite time having been too short. The 'Sibiu International Theatre Festival' in Romania, one of the three major international art festivals in Europe, has a quite different approach. In addition to the annual international academic seminar as the key exchange programme of the art festival, artist dialogues, post-performance discussions and forums organised by various art critics are held daily, one after another, involving industry professionals and audiences, the 'officialness' of which increases the visibility of art criticism and creates an intellectual image for the art festival. Most of these events are free of charge, and from the perspective of the buying and selling of resources, introducing art criticism in art festivals does not lead to an immediate return, but in the long run, art festivals will not only benefit in the documentation, education, and audience development, but also find a way to brand and image building.

Another resource is translation. The criticism events of the 'Sibiu International Theatre Festival' are usually conducted in English or with simultaneous interpretation, which undoubtedly helps increase participation and internationalisation of the event. Of course, no small resource is spent there. 'Re-imagine Dance in Asia' was conducted in English, and due to resource restraint, no simultaneous interpretation was provided. That was a mutual consensus from the beginning, therefore when inviting dance critics, the ability to speak in English became a consideration. When organising international art events in Hong Kong, bilingualism and trilingualism are not necessarily just out of practical

concerns. As organisers in the face of limited resources, maintaining the cultural and political appropriateness of language is a big challenge. In his 'A Response to "Re-imagining Dance in Asia" Symposium Report, and on the Demonstration of Western Cultural Hegemony and the Difference Between Eastern and Western Dance cultures', artistic director of CCDF, Willy Tsao's serious evaluation cannot but be appreciated. It should be CCDF's goal and ideal to provide translation of major Asian languages in the symposium.⁶ Yet, to CCDF, it aimed for exchange between Asia and the world starting from Hong Kong; in addition, it centred around dance, which—at the performance level—transcends language. Therefore, under resource considerations, for the symposium which only accounted for 5% of the entire festival, to adopt English as the main language seemed 'justifiable'. However, it is precisely because the symposium was the only official speech-based event in the festival, English and 'the West' (as opposed to the discussed 'East') inevitably became a 'hegemony', albeit in fact no more than a helpless 'expediency'.

Consideration 3: Asia

Nevertheless, the translation of languages was certainly not where the stress should fall in the Forum in CCDF in the dance festival, but the translation of culture. 'Asia' (in fact, the participating works of CCDF in the first CCDF were predominantly from East Asia and lacked the voice of South Asia) as the keyword of CCDF's organising, was probably still an exploration on the part of the dance festival—which is not necessarily a negative statement, as the definition of 'Asia' is also fluid: the historical 'Asia', geographical 'Asia', political 'Asia', cultural 'Asia', or 'Asia' in

the context of the West... 'Asia' cannot easily be defined at any level. In addition to the so-called 'Western cultural hegemony' grand narrative as described by Tsao, the fluidity of 'Asia' becomes rather interesting, and can actually be the strategy for CCDF to develop discussion and establish discourse through art criticism.

In fact, the 'New Imagination' in the Chinese title of the symposium may lead to the dualisation of imagination, while the English title 'Re-imagine' has a sense of accepting feedback and welcoming the new. The subtle choice of words became interesting in such complicated situations. Lee Hoi-yin Joanna summarised the views of the main speakers in 'The Unimaginable "Asian Dance": On the Hong Kong City Contemporary Dance Festival "ChatBox Forum"'. I agree with Liu Chun-liang that 'to imagine Asia as a holistic entity is a myth in itself. My concern is what kind of "reality" contemporary dance is dealing with.'⁷ She did not evade the distance between herself and Asia, rather she contemplated the possibility of how this distance has moulded her reading of these works. It is not uncommon in the dance industry to look forward to and create 'Asia' with such a holistic view, especially as the narrative for publicity. From the 'Asia Network for Dance (AND+)', initiated by the 'West Kowloon Cultural District' in 2017 to connect and promote Asian dance, Co-Convener 2018-19 Anna CY Chan mentioned in an event that 'a concrete experience is that the international scene has really shifted its focus to Asia. As the West's development matures, the world becomes very curious about Asian artists, works, and aesthetics, with a strong desire to know more.'⁸ 'Hong Kong Dance Exchange' was first organised

in 2018 by choreographer and dance educator Daniel Yeung, who acted as the artistic director. He once expressed that Hong Kong could take advantage of its role as the exchange centre in Asia to connect all parts of Asia and establish alliances, 'to create good works for the Asian stage, after which we will gather the power of Asia and let the world see us.'⁹

Obviously, even if producers are conscious and even cautious about the diversity and complexity of Asia, as a member of Asia, when faced with another relatively mature cultural production system, it is inevitable to aspire to a commonality and common language that is conducive to the uniting of power, so that 'Asia' can be more easily seen in marketing, although such a holistic definition may tend to flatten 'Asia' and render it even more difficult to unravel. As CCDF has set the precedent of collaborating with art criticism, the two should strive together for a wider space, to carry out long-term and effective discussions through in-depth exchanges, so as to alleviate what in Tsao's comment that 'western experts in the symposium do not understand (East) Asia's cultural development and civilisation at all',¹⁰ hence incapable of criticising and imagining the Asian myth. It is indeed a manifestation of 'professionalism' for art critics to place the objects of evaluation in an appropriate context. However, it does not mean that such a context is necessary to make a reasonable evaluation of a work. Context is also relative, and we may see different aspects of a work when we discard such obligations.

The International Association of Theatre Critics released the code of practice for drama critics in 2009. In 'A Note for Criticism of the Future: Code of Practice for Drama Critics', Keng Yi-wei believed that this code 'in addition to the diversification of contemporary theatre art, reflects also the latest developments in the humanities and arts in the second half of the 20th century.'¹¹ In the article, theatre critics refer to drama critics, though not limited to critics of drama, instead referring in general to various performances and forms. Here two points are worth considering: '1. As writers and thinkers in the media and/or as scholars connected to various branches of academic discourse, theatre critics should always remain aware of normative professional practices, respect artistic and intellectual freedom, and should write in what they believe to be the best interests of the ideals of the art of theatre. 2. Theatre critics should recognise that their own imaginative experience and knowledge is often limited and should be open to new ideas, forms, styles and practice.' Cross-border and cross-regional performing arts will only become more numerous and more complex. The 'professionalism' art critics need to embody is not only in the knowledge they already possess and are comfortable with, but to some extent also in unknown and uncertain experiences, therefore 'to be open and embracing' will be a more effective strategy. And in future art criticism events, such exchanges will become more urgent.

Probably a Conclusion

About his experimental work *20 Minutes for the 20th Century*, but Asian, Taiwanese choreographer River Lin said, '(Boris Charmatz's) *20 Dancers*

for the XX Century and (Tino Seghal's) *20 Minutes for the 20th Century* have inspired my thinking about how to address the notions of dance history in the Asian context. The development of *20 Minutes for the 20th Century*, but Asian has become a critical reflection.'¹² I missed this work when it came to Hong Kong in 2018, but am deeply interested in his meta-thinking about his relationship with Asia, which may be just like in the 'Re-imagining Dance in Asia' symposium, when Mahasarinand responded to Djurberg's comment that the works in the dance festival were very 'Western', he said that 'the Asian dance he has seen in Europe tends to deliberately highlight tradition, but that is not the current and real Asia. He believes that to imagine Asia, one must acknowledge its true state.'¹³ Similarly, to imagine the promotion of art criticism and its possibilities, for me, one should not be confined within the methodology of 'tradition'. The reality is that art criticism has become quite fragmented in the digital age, published in a situation where speed is paramount. How text, under this circumstance, attracts the reader's attention seems more important, while the trend of 'hate speech' negative entertainment reviews poses another problem. New York-based theatre critic and reporter Jonathan Mandell, in his 'Are Theatre Critics Critical? An Update', quoted *New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott's response to criticisms of criticism, 'Criticism is a habit of mind, a discipline of writing, a way of life—a commitment to the independent, open-ended exploration of works of art in relation to one another and the world around them. As such, it is always apt to be misunderstood, undervalued and at odds with itself. Artists will complain, fans will tune out, but the arguments will never end.'¹⁴ After losing his job as a film critic on a TV

station, A. O. Scott was invited to speak about the 'future of criticism'. He said that the future will be as usual, 'The future of criticism is the same as it ever was. Miserable, and full of possibility.'¹⁵ I look forward to possibilities; constant debate is where vitality lies. How we transform criticism into a concept and strategy that intervene into production and curation, open up possibilities of art criticism's creativity and exchange, and allow it to effect a more meaningful imagination than other fringe events, entails the sustainable future of art criticism.

Endnotes

- ¹ City Contemporary Dance Company, City Contemporary Dance Festival Programme Guide (2017), https://issuu.com/ccdcmt/docs/ccdf_2017_programme_guide.
- ² Benny Lim, '[Critique in the Front Line] Theatre Critics and Their Capital,' in *International Association of Theatre Critics* (January 2018), <http://www.iatc.com.hk/doc/27978?a=doc&id=101979>.
- ³ Wang Yi-ru, 'Gengyiwei: Yishujie buzhishi Tigong Yanchu' (Keng Yi-wei: Art Festivals Must Not Stop at Solely Providing Performances)' in *China Times* (Taiwan: 26 May 2015), <https://www.chinatimes.com/newspapers/20150526000443-260115?chdtv>.
- ⁴ 2017 'Taipei Arts Festival', *Minorities*, <http://61.64.60.109/175taipeifestival.Web/FilmContent.aspx?ID=3>.
- ⁵ Keng Yi-wei, 'Message from Artistic Director,' <http://61.64.60.109/175taipeifestival.Web/content.aspx?FWebID=1&subid=9>.
- ⁶ Willy Tsao, 'Dui "Yazhouwudaoxinxiangxiang" Luntanbaogao de Huiying—Jianlun Xifangwenhuabaquan de Zhanxian he Dongxifang Wudaowenhua de Chayi' (A response to 'Re-imagining Dance in Asia' symposium report, and on the demonstration of Western cultural hegemony and the difference between Eastern and Western dance cultures), in *Performing Arts Review* (February 14, 2018), <https://par.npac-ntch.org/tw/news/doc-%E5%B0%8D%E3%80%8A%E4%BA%9E%E6%B4%B2%E8%88%9E%E8%B9%88%E6%96%B0%E6%83%B3%E5%83%8F%E3%80%8B%E8%AB%96%E5%A3%87%E5%A0%B1%E5%91%8A%E7%9A%84%E5%9B%9E%E6%87%89-%E2%94%80%E2%94%80%E5%85%BC%E8%AB%96%E8%A5%BF%E6%96%B9%E6%96%87%E5%8C%96%E9%9C%B8%E6%AC%8A%E7%9A%84%E5%B1%95%E7%8F%B%E5%92%8C%E6%9D%B1%E8%A5%BF%E6%96%B9%E8%88%9E%E8%B9%88%E6%96%87%E5%8C%96%E7%9A%84%E5%B7%AE%E7%95%Bo-eyahe8w7v8>.
- ⁷ Lee Hoi-yin Joanna, 'Nanyixiangxiang de "Yazhouwudao" ji Xianggangchengshidangdaiwudaojie zhi "ChatBox Luntan"' (The Unimaginable 'Asian Dance': On the Hong Kong City Contemporary Dance Festival 'ChatBox Forum'), in *Performing Arts Review*, Vol. 301 (Taiwan: January 2018).
- ⁸ Yi Wenji, 'Yazhouqu Wudao Wangluo AND+ Yuanfu Deguoyishushichang Guoji Yejie de Yijian shi...' (Asia Network for Dance AND+ in German Art Market: On the Opinion of the International Industry...), in *The Stand News* (Hong Kong: 29 October 2018), <https://www.thestandnews.com/art/%E4%BA%9E%E6%B4%B2%E5%8D%80%E8%88%9E%E8%B9%88%E7%B6%B2%E7%B5%A1-and-%E9%81%A0%E8%B5%B4%E5%BE%B7%E5%9C%8B%E8%97%9D%E8%A1%93%E5%B8%82%E5%A0%B4-%E5%9C%8B%E9%9A%9B%E6%A5%AD%E7%95%8C%E7%9A%84%E6%84%8F%E8%A6%8B%E6%98%AF/>.
- ⁹ Godric Leung, "Xianggangbiwu"—Rang Bendi Nianqing Bianwuzhe Tashang Rihantaiwuta' ('Hong Kong Dance Exchange': Bring local young choreographers onto the stages in Japan, Korea and Taiwan), in *Mingpao Weekly* (Hong Kong: 13 December 2017), <https://www.mpweekly.com/culture/%e9%a6%99%e6%b8%af%e6%af%94%e8%88%9e-%e7%95%b6%e4%bb%a3%e8%88%9e-%e7%b7%a8%e8%88%9e%e8%80%85-60964>.

¹⁰. See note 6.

¹¹. Keng Yi-wei, 'Weilai Pinglun Beiwanglu —Gei Jupingjia de Zhiyechunze' (A Note for Criticism of the Future: Code of Practice for Drama Critics), in *Performing Arts Review*, Vol. 204 (Taiwan: December 2009).

¹². Chang I-wen, 'Taiwanren de Shenti, Ruhe "Yazhou"? Ershishìjì Wudaoshi, Zai Yazhou' (How is the Taiwanese body 'Asian'? 20 Minutes for the 20th Century, but Asian), in *PARreviews* (Taiwan: 14 November 2016), <https://pareviews.ncafroc.org.tw/?p=22025>.

¹³. See note 7.

¹⁴. Jonathan Mandell, 'Are Theatre Critics Critical? An Update', in *Howl Round Theatre Commons* (1 April 2015), <https://howlround.com/are-theatre-critics-critical-update>.

¹⁵ A. O. Scott, 'A Critic's Place, Thumb and All', in *The New York Times* (U.S.: 31 March 2010), <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/04/movies/04scott.html>.