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Su Wen-Chi: Broadening the Horizon, Investigating the Essence

[Tsou, Shin-Ning - 2015.08.22](#)



YiLab., Su Wen-Chi, Photo Credit : YiLab.

Q: Let us begin with your recent participation at the Kunsten Festival des Arts and Kalamata International Dance Festival. What were some of the differences when staging *Off the Map* for the European audiences?

A: The dance piece was created three years ago. Staging the piece again after all this time allowed me to examine it from a distance, so that I could see clearly how the work stands on its own, with all of its uniqueness and idiosyncrasies. It gave me a better understanding of what the audience actually saw in the piece.

This time we brought the production to Europe. What was different with this experience is that we were discussing whether or not to put on subtitles for the performance, for *Off the Map* is a work abundant in literal texts. In the end, I insisted that we leave the subtitles out, since we've wanted to use language to convey sounds and rhythms from the start.

Even though English is the most commonly used language in the performing arts scene, I still think that when trying to appreciate a certain culture through the arts, we should do it more intuitively and react to each work's characteristics. The same thing applies to language. We should avoid being excessively analytical towards a given text. That being said, we still distributed a copy of the excerpts featured in the performance right after the performance, so that the audience members can have a better understanding about the work in general.

Q: What you just said reminded me of my own experience when I saw *Off the Map* three years ago. I recall the voice over being carried out through directional loudspeakers, as if the sound was flowing through the theater space...

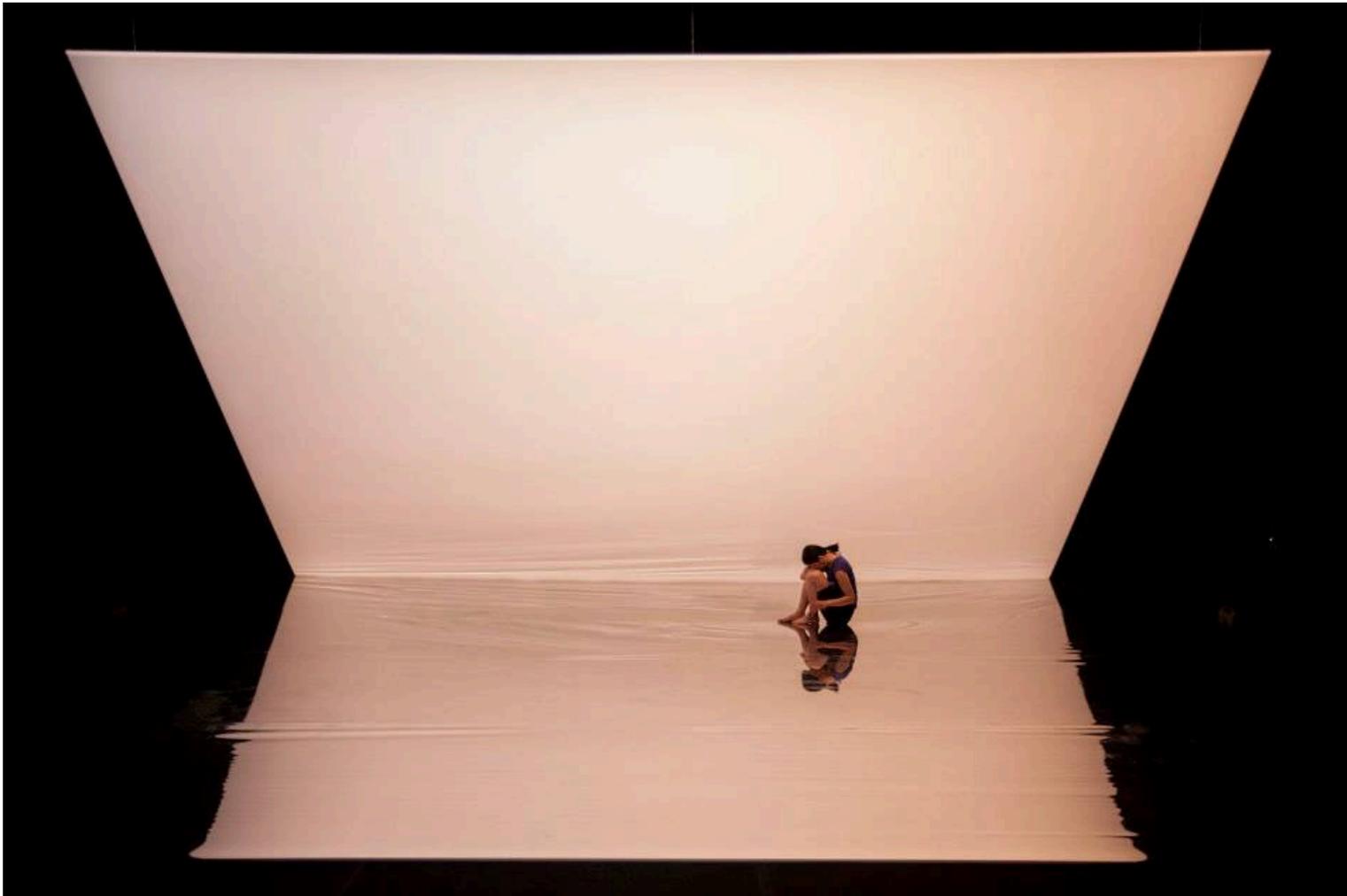
A: Exactly. When we performed in Europe this time, the sounds were treated with even more delicacy. For me, *Off the Map* portrays an unconscious state, or rather, a kind of hypnotized moment. I have only one hour to slowly and subtly introduce audience members to that state of mind. And indeed, many have come up to me after the performance, saying how the experience resembled a hypnosis session.

YiLab., *Off the Map*, Photo Credit: YiLab.

Q: Both Kunsten Festival des Arts and Kalamata International Dance Festival are considered to be the most important arts festivals in Europe. Care to share your observation on these two major events?

A: I think that Kunsten Festival des Arts is very socially conscious, and this year in particular, as there were a lot of issues concerning international politics and economics being addressed in individual works. The past year has seen many political confrontations, refugee crises, and economic problems, and the EU countries are all in this together. It so happened that the budget for cultural funding was reduced significantly this year in Belgium. Given the circumstances, the main theme for the festival this year resembles a declaration which restates the bond between art and society. Meanwhile, it reminds audiences that artists are not groups of social outsiders who distance themselves from society. I saw most of the performances when I was there, and almost all the artists presented at the festival have ventured into "popularizing art." Such is the case with Jerome Bel, who continues to focus on amateur dancers. It made me reexamine many things, including to what extent can a dance be called "professional," and if it is true that only the "professional dance" is allowed to play a part in the economics of the arts.

Generally speaking, I think the atmosphere of this year's Kunsten Festival des Arts is pretty solemn. One can detect the anxiety that people share as an aftermath of losing the budget. This is also being reflected in the theater languages and the scripts. In fact, such anxiousness is commonly shared among people who work in the theater. For a long while, the mass media has been slowly wearing down people's trust in languages and texts. I attended many theater performances in Brussels, and I have to say that they were all overloaded with texts, to a point that one felt very much drained and exhausted after seeing only two performances in a day, because of all the information that was being communicated. In comparison, while *Off the Map* also features a substantial amount of texts, they are delivered abstractly through melodic patterns, so that the audience can receive them more intuitively through bodily senses. Consequently, even though the subject matter is pretty serious, the audience generally thinks the work is light. That, for me, is quite interesting.



YiLab., Rehearsal of Off the Map @ Kunsten Festival des Arts, Photo Credit:Wu Chi-Tsung

Q; What about Greece? When you were there, the whole country was going through the referendum to decide whether or not to accept the bailout conditions proposed by the EU. Did you feel any of that at the arts festival?

A: When I was there, many audience members came to talk to me after the show. The country was having a crisis at that moment, so that everyone was kind of agitated, anxious and disappointed in a way. I think it must've been a mixture of feelings to be in a situation like that. Most of them told me that what they got from the performance was a kind of quiet journey. This reminds me of an issue we discussed at the inception stage of *Off the Map*. We talked about where we usually go when we are too weighed down by our emotions. The first thing that came to our minds was the outdoors and the nature, that is, more spacious surroundings. For us, these types of spaces can absorb our complicated thoughts and give us a peace of mind.

Even while these spaces do not necessarily offer a solution to the status quo, they make rooms for our troubled minds. As Greece was going through a serious economical crisis, I think the work offered Greek people and their senses an outlet to release whatever they were troubling them.

Whether it was Belgium or Greece, we were glad that we got to showcase the work at this particular time. It allowed us to experience first hand the crises or the situations of the individual societies. We realized afterwards that some of these local issues are in fact universal. Knowing that we will all strive hard to find the solutions to our shared problems really made us feel less stranded.



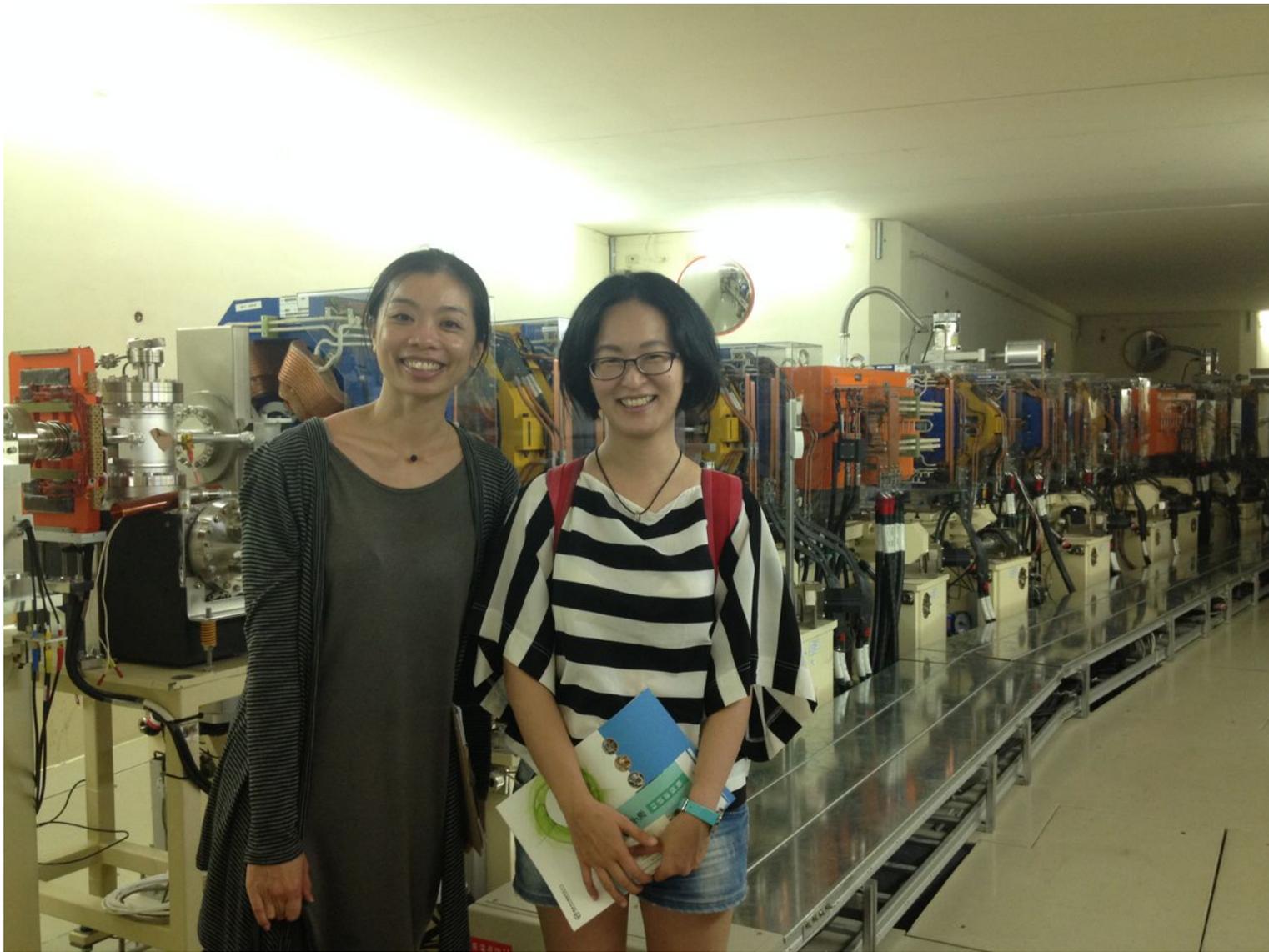
2015 Kalamata International Dance Festival, Photo Credit:Wu Chi-Tsung

Q: I noticed that you spent most of 2015 in Europe. Following your next visit to Art Gwangju in September, you will also be performing in Geneva. Are any of these arrangements related to your participation in Accelerate@CERN Taiwan as the artist in residence at the CERN (Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire) next January?

A: My collaborator Lin Pei-Ying and I are now preparing for our residency next year. When we perform in Geneva this coming September, the artist director at CERN will come and see the performance. I will probably take the opportunity to interview him first. Also, to gather more information, in October I will go to Switzerland for a workshop organized by a choreographer who was once in the residency programme at CERN. Even though we have one month at CERN, there are just so many things that we would like to see and do. So we need to be well prepared. I am certain that it will be an exciting one-month for both of us.

Q: What ideas did you come up with for the Accelerate@CERN Taiwan?

A: We want to deal with the idea of interconnectivity. Between things that are connected, we wonder if there's any underlying principle that can be applied to all such relations. As an artist, I am interested in the interconnections between the different media that I have included in my works. I am curious to know if the principles that govern my bodily motions are in any way connected to these media. Recently, I have been trying to familiarize myself with some general physics as well as quantum physics. I want to find the shared principles between my body movements and physics. But I really suck at physics...



Left : Su Wen-Chi Right : Lin Pei-Ying, CERN, Photo Credit:YiLat

Q: You said before that you are not that good with technology, but then you showcased five digital performance pieces in a roll. And now you said that you don't really know much about physics. I wonder what made you choose this topic as the main theme for your next creation?

A: It is precisely because of not having any clue that makes me want to study the subject even more. It has always been my objective to approach my creations and to see the status quo in the contemporary arts scene from a grander perspective. With the combination of technology and the arts, I have come to a standstill after several attempts, and it stems from the fear that "I will never understand anything more important than what I have already." I want to continue creating new works, but I need to examine an even more significant issue, with even more layers to support my future endeavors. However, contemporary arts tend to tackle only current issues, and this limitation could easily be misleading.

I did some research on the CERN a while ago. What's interesting about the organization is that for many years, they have been eager to explore the correlation between art and science. I saw a documentary of a conversation between an artist and a scientist. In it, the scientist expressed that he/ she thinks the time frames that artists explore are often limited to the few decades in their own lives, whereas scientists usually work with longer timelines. They'd trace back to the origin of life to examine the essence of life. What scientists do seems to be intriguingly more essential than artists. Meanwhile, artists who went to CERN also mention how science has helped broaden their perspectives and opened up their egos. This can be very beneficial to the artists. Once your eyes are open, the possibilities of combining technology and art can be limitless.

In addition, I also discovered one other thing: What we call technology nowadays is in fact only the application of the techniques we have at the moment, whereas science is the discipline of technology. We have always applied cultural science

to the integration of technology and the arts, but now I understand that science is a body of knowledge that stands on its own.

As a matter of fact, arts and sciences used to be linked together as the same school. Only later were distinctions made for each subject area to develop individually. When we talked about interconnectivity, we also mentioned this distinction. How everything is divided gradually throughout history, and how detrimental this can be. When we separate body from materiality, or, to put it more commonly, when we treat the body and the mind separately, this could result in dire consequences.

Q: I guess we can still expect to see you to continue the task of combing the arts and the sciences in the future. My last question is: What do you think technology would be like when it is developed to an extreme?

A: I think as technology reaches an extreme state, it should be non-existent. It ought to head towards the past instead of the future. And this non-existence would make humans face their unknown surroundings more directly. For the unknown would allow us to retain a fundamental respect for life and for our own existence. Ultimately, for me, the pursuit of technology should not be “what we can accomplish with it,” but rather “what we would gain without it.”



YiLab., «W.A.V.E.» , Photo Credit:YiLat

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