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When Body Loses its Trace and Suspends in the midst of Eternity: The Vacuum Anomaly in Su Wen-Chi's Off the Map

[Chiu, Chih-Yung - 2015.08.22](#)

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

*My wing is ready for flight,
I would like to turn back,
If I stay timeless time,
I would have little luck.*

by Gerhard Scholem

"I know this year's work will have to deal with the past because there is no way forward." – Su Wen-Chi

This is a story about life and death, about suspending the body in the state of eternity, about the painful memory of looking backward: but failing to return to the past.

It is said that the 21 grams a person loses at death is the weight of the soul (1). The soul leaves the body and moves around like duckweeds. It floats in the air, sticks to nothing and is in a state of tiny particles. Sometimes, these particles come together and form objects visible to the naked eyes, or what we call "ghosts".

As Nicholas Mirzoeff put it, "It is the time of the ghost, the revenant and the specter. The ghost is somewhere between the visible and



the invisible, appearing clearly to some but not to others" (2). Aided by advanced digital technology, the "shadow" not only breaks away from the "body" to become the subject, it also consumes the subject. In *Off the Map*, the audience does not find any sign of figurative art on a minimalistic and abstract stage. Su's body directly morphs into a ghost-like figure which is portrayed as staying in a virtual space. Between the visible and invisible, the material and immaterial, physical representation and phenomenon, Su finds a path to incarnation and constructs a "timeless time journey".

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

As Su's twisted body begins to move slowly, there comes a low droning sound. Leaping to the eyes is a scene of abstract visual imagery. Su's body, as if having just gone through a soul-out-of-body experience, stands alone on the stage, lonely to the point of displaying a kind of surrealistic chill. She has her limbs extend to the extreme, then crawls, acting like a soul revealing itself.

Su's body is like a dance piece of "no dance", in which it moves alone and tardily on the stage. One finds not much reconstructed choreography but rather the artist's choice for an alternative type of minimalistic style to allow spectators to carefully examine the features of the body. The dancer's floor moves, the tendency of having her head and the body come close to the floor and making the body to strain and twist all trace back to some of the most typical choreographic language in America's "concept dance" (3). In this minimalistic dance piece, the posture of the dancer's body becomes the most eye-catching center of attention. The deliberately emphasized movements are emotionally infectious.

Stage designer Wu Chi-Tsung sets up a spacious and minimalistic stage and uses a highly reflective material (automotive heat shields) to display a clean-cut reflection of a body, creating a narcissistic type of mirror image reminiscent of the iconic work by German choreographer Sasha Waltz, *Körper*, in which the dancer is placed in a glass box to as a symbolic gesture to celebrate human body. Monologue, written by Chou Man-Nung, is recited to transform the image of death depicted in the writing. Wang Fu-Jui's directional speakers and atonal sounds help create a feeling of immersion for the audience.

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

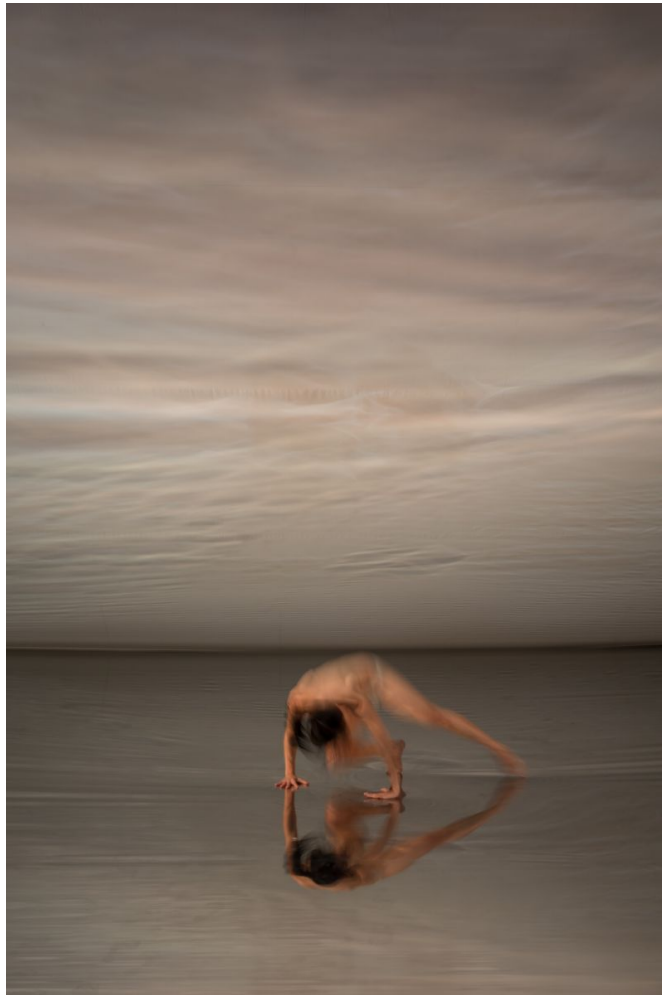
If we liken a theatrical performance to a semiotic system, performance refers to the “actual performance” of people. It can only claim to be “present” or “taking place” via the artist’s actual action. Such action is subject to temporal and spatial confinement and happens during live performance in real time and real space. This point of view highlights the following: As human being, we are what our bodies are. It is because we reside in this body that we exist. It is also because of this body that our existence is able to expand (4). In *Off the Map*, the performance depends on the “presence” of the body, but it nevertheless attempts to shake off the constraint of the body to experiment with all kinds of bodily performance. (Generally, the body is seen as a carrier of symbols.)

Apart from references to the semiotics of the body, the concept of *Off the Map* is even more related to the implementation of technology. YiLab., the group behind *Off the Map*, is like any other performing art groups which engage heavily in technology. It is savvy in picking the right new media technology. For example, it captures the gestures of dancers on a real time basis and displays their movements on the screen via computers to create the effect of having an alternative space for performance, juxtaposing reality with virtuality. However, this time around with *Off the Map*, YiLab. seems to start off from Aristotle’s theory of “nature abhors a vacuum” by engulfing the audience with the abstract nature of projected imagery, performativity of the slow-moving dancer, the narrative quality of figurative discourse and immersive auditory experience enabled by directional speakers. The almost whisper-like discourse and narrative can be said as the artwork’s most concrete element, which guides the slow-moving gestures, abstract concepts and the empty stage to depict what the body perceives.

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

In *Off the Map*, all the phenomenological thinking about “body and shadow” or “body and consciousness” is suspended. When Su’s body is presented alone in the middle of an empty stage, the “empty” stage suspends the “site-specificity” blurring itself with the surrounding white screens to generate a poignant “ghostly” effect. This abstract body, “bracketed” by a timeless atmosphere, resembles the angel image in *Wings of Desire* by Win Wenders. In there, the angel floats above the world, listening the voice of the people and looking down at the action of the world for eternity. Put simply, when the body becomes the only living entity in a universe-like realm (cloud) with perceptual capabilities, its soul appears to be left at a particular moment (instant) in history and loses track of all worldly contexts. Bearing this in mind, all the image devices or the stage in *Off the Map* are configured to give the stage a blank visual setting and blank space for the very purpose of letting the dancer perform the artwork, allowing the imagery of the body to embody (experience) the traces of the subject (including figurative poetry) in such an artwork. The performance of *Off the Map* shows that imagery not only entails the presence of the perceived object, it also involves thoughts and the mechanism of perception. If we define “presence” and “perception” as counterparts, visualized space of perception is constantly renewing our perception of time and space and proves *Dasein*, or *being-in-itself* (5).

Overall, *Off the Map* breaks away from conventional thinking and scope of imagination. The work utilizes various mediums combines different types of art and the narrative text is embedded with compound meanings. The unfolding of the artwork’s meaning reflects this diverse nature. Besides, *Off the Map* goes beyond conventional aesthetics. It features a retreat to the context of the artist’s own memory triggers interaction and convergence across disciplines. As an interdisciplinary artwork *Off the Map* relies on its interaction and integration with other fields to deliver or disclose the much-neglected thoughts about the context of a person’s life.



YiLab., *Off the Map*, Photo Credit: Lee Hsin-Che (MOT/TIME)

Notes:

1: Another claim is 35 grams.

2: Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Ghostwriting: working out visual culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* (1:2), 2002, pp. 239-254.

3: Philippe Noisette, *Danse Contemporaine*, (in traditional Chinese) translated by Wu Pei-fen. Taipei: Uni-Books. 2012, pp. 88.

4: Kjell Yngve Petersen, "The Emergence of Hyper-reality in Performance," *New Visions in Performance: The Impact of Digital Technologies*. Eds. Gavin Carver & Colli Beardon. Netherlands: Swets & Zeitlinger, 2004, pp. 32-34.

5: Chou Shi-yen, *Jianzhuwu yu xiang: Yuancheng zaichang de yingxiang luoji* (in simplified Chinese) [Building and Image: The image logic of long-distance presence.] Nanjing Southeast University Press, 2007, pp. 134.

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