

香港舞蹈概述

**D** **HONG**  
**KONG**  
**ance**  
**2020** **verview**

FELIXISM  
CREATION

# 香港舞蹈概述2020

## *Hong Kong Dance Overview 2020*

|  |   |
|--|---|
| 主編、行政統籌<br>Editor and Administration Coordinator               | 陳偉基 (肥力)<br>Chan Wai-ki Felix   |
| 主編、執行編輯 (英文版)<br>Editor and Executive Editor (English version) | 李海燕<br>Lee Hoi-yin Joanna   |
| 執行編輯 (中文版)<br>Executive Editor (Chinese version)               | 羅妙妍<br>Miu Law  |
| 翻譯 Translators   | 張紫茵<br>Dorothy Cheung<br>劉偉娟<br>Lau Wai-kuen Caddie<br>李挽靈<br>Lee Wan-ling Mary |
| 校對 Proof-readers   | 羅妙妍<br>Miu Law<br>李海燕<br>Lee Hoi-yin Joanna                                     |
| 美術設計、排版<br>Graphic Design and Typeset                          | Felixism Creation   |
| 出版 Publisher   | Felixism Creation   |
| 網站 Website   | <a href="http://www.danceresearch.com.hk/">http://www.danceresearch.com.hk/</a> |
| 出版日期 Published date  | 28 Feb 2022   |
| 國際標準書號   | ISBN : 978-988-75925-3-2  |

本刊物內所有圖文資料，版權均屬 **Felixism Creation** 及個別圖文提供者所有。大量轉引、複製、或將其用於商業用途，均可構成侵權行為，編輯室保留追究權利。

All rights reserved. Large-scale quotation, copying and reproduction for commercial purpose is considered infringement of copyright. When such situation arises, the Editorial Team reserves the right to take legal action against involved individuals and/or organisations.

### 資助 Supported by



香港藝術發展局全力支持藝術表達自由，本計劃內容並不反映本局意見。  
Hong Kong Arts Development Council fully supports freedom of artistic expression.  
The views and opinions expressed in this project do not represent the stand of the Council.

# MOVEMENT/IMAGE: Re-situating Dance and the Moving Image in Hong Kong, 2020

Elysa Wendi

In early March 2020, right as the COVID-19 pandemic began to intensify globally, the performing art sector of Hong Kong was asked to respond to the escalating context of major lockdowns, which resulted in not just the shutting down of performance spaces and theatres, but also the suspension of all live performances slated to take place in-person. A situation not unique to Hong Kong but in fact happening worldwide, dance communities were tasked with the sudden objective of mediating their works digitally, with whatever available online streaming platforms at hand, and finding some semblance of normalcy in the continuation of their artistic productions. Though experimentations and collaborations between both lens-based and performance-based practitioners have taken place consistently since the 1960s in Europe and North America, these inter-medial ventures have not gained much traction in East Asia until recent years, with the advent of various initiatives and projects that featured explicitly collaborative works. In this regard, what the pandemic prompted, I argue, was not a sudden transition into a forced *pas de deux* between dance and the screen, but rather an acceleration of a process that is still fairly nascent yet gradually coming into being. I speak of this from experience, as a practitioner whose practice has been influenced by exposure to artists and works such as Maya Deren from the 1940s, Yvonne Rainer from the 70s, Derek Jarman, DV8, Anne Teresa De

Keersmaecker, and La La La Human Steps from the mid-80s, to name a few.

Noting that digital adaptations have thus arisen as a natural response to mitigate the impact of a global catastrophe that is the pandemic, they have also become ubiquitous and necessary, even beginning to affect and facilitate a certain undercurrent in the development of the artistic and creative processes of performing artists and performance-based practitioners. Observing the increase in inter-/trans-disciplinary collaborations between practitioners of the performing arts and assorted media-based practices, including but not limited to film, digital art, and new media, unique situations and unforeseen collaborations have yielded both novel audio-visual propositions and unexpected experimentations in hybridised forms that sometimes work, and other times do not. What is particularly interesting lies in the process: these practitioners mostly struggle to understand each other since they do not have the same background, artistic language, or even practical and productive context.

This new mode of working, foisted upon the artistic community by an inescapable context, and the prevalence of needing to create *collaboratively* have thus raised intriguing questions and themes that draw into view some new ways of thinking and making performances. Identifying three main thrusts in contemporary developments, this essay aims to unpack the following observations through a few case studies that I encountered and have been privy to the process of, over the course of the last year:

1. The development of new imaginaries in both form and content mediated by technology, where the usage of digital media has transformed the expression and perception of movement and performance, leading to shifts in creative paradigms;
2. The steady transitions between functional intents of digital media, where practitioners are forced to use technology to overcome physical limitations in exhibition or production, and artistic intents, where practitioners adopt the idioms, formats, and idiosyncrasies of digital technology as part of their (expanded) artistic practice;
3. Differences in expectations and understanding within collaborations between moving image practitioners and dance practitioners.

Intersections and interplay between these three trends have led to an overarching concern with how these hybridised works muddy notions of authorial agency and ownership, which implicates not just the intellectual property of the works at large, but much more profound questions of artistic intent and origins.

This essay will explore the convergence of dance and digital technologies with reference to a few projects that have experimented and experienced the different processes and outcomes borne through collaborations, which relate to my own interest in how new presentation modes through technological interventions could shape a new paradigm for future moving image projects working with/through dance. This essay will also re-examine digital technology and media in relation to their

representation of corporeality, liveness, and spectatorship, in the context of a broadening knowledge base and acceptance by both content creators and audience who have been experiencing performance from radically re-defined spheres, time, and perspectives. In this regard, this essay is thus orientated towards the implications, both logistical and artistic, of the digitally 'native' work, that is, works produced through the amalgamation of technological considerations, the uniqueness of digital platforms and processes, and artistic concerns, and not works which function more as documentations or live broadcast of a traditionally staged work.

Will the development of this new presentational lexicon facilitate the growth of a new generation of digital native dancers and choreographers, who have the necessary skills and experience to understand and create within the mode of digital performativity? How do we enable them to develop and engage further with accessible digital tools to support and expand the horizons of the choreographic process and creation? The vessel of presentation may indeed be shifting, and therefore if the body, as the vessel for performance, is undergoing a transformative process in relation to form, practice, production, and its interaction with the audience, we may thus be entering a new frontier of performance-making and -viewing rooted in an entirely new imagination and vocabulary.

When we speak of the audience and spectatorship, we may also suddenly realise that the undefined geographical context of the digital realm has also opened up discussions of how the borderless-ness and post-spatial nature of a site-specific performance may be approached physically. This borderless-ness is also mirrored temporally: the ease of which we

have been given unlimited access to international content from past to present, from un-defined time zones all over the world, have also erased temporal boundaries that previously limited physical productions to specific localities.

The increase in geographical diversity in spectatorship owing to this borderless and timeless condition, alongside a certain glut of content which are almost excessive, constitutes interesting phenomena that have also raised new points of concern and consternation on many scales and timeframes, involving major institutions, artistic agents, commercial agents, as well as the many independent scenes and practitioners from across the world.

### **Case Study 1**

*Since Our Last Goodbye (1): Lost & Found* and *Since Our Last Goodbye (2): Reset* by Hui Chun-kit Cyrus @ Siu Lung Fung Dance Theatre and Kwok Hiu-ling Elaine (September 2020).

A series of two interactive live-streamed performances that juxtaposed the artist-performers' reflective questioning of their lives with their relationship to the city they are living in, *Since Our Last Goodbye (1): Lost & Found* featured a live-streamed performance on a chosen public space and the domestic space inhabited by the creator(s) while contemplating their responses to their time of isolation owing to the pandemic lockdowns, while *Since Our Last Goodbye (2): Reset* focused on a public space which held great meaning for the Hong Kong dance community.

The theatrical field of *Since Our Last Goodbye (1): Lost & Found* existed somewhere between the exterior space traversed by Kwok on a Hong Kong street, captured by a GoPro camera installed on her body, and the interior space occupied by Hui, who performed his segment at home with a 360-degree camera mounted to give a top view of the room. Presented as a two-channel live-streamed video captured in one take, the work is a filmic choreography controlled and orchestrated wholly by the artist-performers. The audience visualisation through the GoPro camera on Kwok's body incorporated Kwok's own perspective of the empty streets and her extended hands and feet which entered the frames simultaneously, while Hui was observed from the top view, through which we could observe how the static camera perspective conjured affects and emotions.

A notable element that contributed to the chemistry present in this project was its liveness, which was usually lacking in digital presentation of dance performances in the early pandemic period, when most online streaming content was either a straightforward recording of a live performance or past performances drawn from archives that were meant to be documentation. While some projects were in the process of digital adaptation which focused on the craft of the filmic visual language, what was explored here was rather different: the vulnerability of the live performance being proposed. We could listen to Kwok's laboured breathing as she performed and showcased the empty streets, which connected with Hui's restless shifting, while details of his home were presented to the audience. The physical emptiness embodied by the



un-occupied urban spaces paired with a confined and clearly delineated domestic space further extended the work's connection to the isolation likely being experienced by the audience at large. This contiguous texture of reality is an important element to consider for the usually-ignored abstract theatre performance. The exploration of how artists connect to the wider society and what functions an artist serves in a time of calamity could be considered a timely milestone for the two artists entering their thirties, as producer Lau Tin-ming stressed during an accompanying sharing session. Interestingly enough, the work actually had two sharing sessions, one before and one after the showing, which served to enhance the connection between the live, though digitally-mediated, audience with both the work and its creators.

*Since Our Last Goodbye (2): Reset*, the second work in the series, was a more ambitious exploration of the capacity of livestream to accommodate multiple perspectives. Engaging thirteen Facebook accounts to feature thirteen live feeds on-site so that the audience could select their own viewing experience of the whole performance, the team worked with the chosen site of the CCDC Dance Centre at Wong Tai Sin as a gesture to pay tribute to a space which had groomed not just the two artist-performers but at least three decades of contemporary dance practitioners in Hong Kong. Possibly a send-off ritual to the space, the performance also served to document the interiors of the space ahead of CCDC vacating the premises in October 2021 due to both re-development and the departure of CCDC founder Willy Tsao from the Company. As an important landmark which had promoted and supported the dance communities of Hong Kong for the past thirty years, the choice of the Centre as the

location of a performance piece titled *Reset* also spoke volume about the creators' vision in response to the accumulating disruptions, chaos, and uncertainty of the communal landscape, and how it could be renewed.

Beside its selection of the performance site, the intervention of technology and live-streaming platform was also well-considered in the presentation of the work, with the deployment of thirteen Facebook live feeds a truly experimental process for the audience to construct their own understanding of the whole performance. Plotless, fragmented, and non-linear, the plural possibilities afforded by the performance both stirred confusions in the audience whilst injected an unpredictable energy as to how the whole event could be perceived and witnessed: the thirteen Facebook live feeds came from thirteen Facebook accounts tagged to thirteen camera positions onsite within the Centre. The multiple angles were fixed in a specific way that would frame the performance when the performers pass by but would otherwise document empty space, which led to many hit-or-miss moments for the cameras, the audience, and the performers. The incidental capturing of the performers at different locations within the Centre was based on chance and mainly improvised, while emotively responding to the discursive significance of the Centre. The concept of the work also questioned our relationship with our digital devices that we used all the time, as well as reflected on our fragmented desires for both the constancy of screens and the rapid switches we made between our screens.

The two works presented as part of *Since Our Last Goodbye* were sensitive contemplations of the artists' response to the pandemic, with

technological interventions integrated as both mechanisms to illustrate the artistic intents as well as a functional device for delivering the works remotely, creating new ways of seeing and experiencing a work. Unlike the usual adaptation of a live performance into digital or streaming presentation, *Since Our Last Goodbye* was conceived right from the beginning to include the elements of digitality and livestream in its content to respond to the present social condition and situation. Further exploration and development of the proposition could be a worthwhile pursuit, even amidst current predictions of a digital fatigue and mass rejection of online media presentation. However, as the creators appear to be looking beyond the technical functionality of the platform and are in fact exploring alternate ways of viewing, the series could bring something interesting to the table concerning the discourse of a tentative post-pandemic mediatised cultural ecosystem.

### **Case Study 2**

‘Jumping Frames International Video Dance Festival 2020: Distanced Intimacies’ with a particular focus on the hybrid screening program ‘Local Focus’, presented by City Contemporary Dance Company (CCDC) in November 2020.

One of the oldest and most important dance and media festivals in Asia since its inception in 2004, Jumping Frames International Video Dance Festival features commissioned works, a competitive section, and a selection of acclaimed international productions over the span of a week-long programme. Originally oriented towards more straightforward video and dance, the Festival has since undergone a gradual transformation

towards a more expansive approach, embracing a greater diversity of the experimentations that could occur between the language of moving image relating to dance and choreography in recent years. I have served as the guest curator of the Festival since 2018, and the chief curator from 2021 onwards.

As a platform to promote dance video and film works in Hong Kong, China and the greater Asia region, the Festival constantly strives to develop new commissions and relevant content by connecting local artists in the area of new dance-film creations, dance and film collaborations, and filmic adaptations of live dance performances. Aiming for the transformation of dance- and movement-based performances that could be achieved through using the visual language and articulations of cinema, as well as choreographic practices meant for the screen, the Festival also aims for more local productions and works to be circulated internationally. Though the Festival mainly presents films in a cinema setting, there has been a shift towards alternate modes of exhibition and installation settings from recent editions since 2018, from when I guest-curated the Festival till my current appointment in 2021. This gradual expansion and adjustments to an expanded definition of performance and the screen was not a one-off decision, but rather a proposition to initiate an interdisciplinary approach in audience development, and to allow for the cross-pollination of more collaborative works between artists from different disciplines so that there is diversity in new creations.

The annual Festival usually occurs in the month of September but was disrupted in 2020 due to the pandemic when the lockdown of

cinemas and galleries had delayed the festival to November. It led to the development of a new sidebar hybrid screening programme: 'Local Focus', which included works commissioned in 2020: *Mountains, Seas, Panorama*, directed by Wilfred Wong; *A Rock*, directed by Shing Lee; *Over Here?*, directed by Zelia ZZ Tan; and, *Maze*, directed by Maurice Lai.

The hybrid screening programme opened up the possibility of clustering audience, which was a new phenomenon in the expansion of audience demographics due to spatial and temporal constraints, where one screening ticket could be purchased to facilitate a gathering of a few people or more in a multitude of venues that has adequate Internet connection and sufficiently big screen to watch the works together in small clusters, as opposed to the audience of the centralised single venue screening of pre-pandemic times. While common sense might dictate that this system will cut down the earning of ticket sales but on the contrary, it has promoted more screening opportunities as film-viewing becomes a more intimate social activity to be shared with friends and not bound by specific time, distance, and place which may actually limit the number of audience constrained by temporal or transportation needs.

Examining the content and nature of the works, it is clear that each film has found meaningful resonances in its exposition that relates to the notion of 'Distanced Intimacies', which subtitles Jumping Frames Festival 2020, derived from a contemplation of the universal condition of spatial dislocation while re-connecting through digital spaces in the time of the pandemic.

*Mountains, Seas, Panorama* by Wilfred Wong is inspired by the ancient Chinese folktale *Kua-fu Chases after the Sun* from the *Shanhai Jing*, or *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*. Expressing the solitude of migratory wandering and the spiritual journey to find the home in unknown land, the scenic portrayal of the film offers a more cosmic perspective by looking into this classic tale to connect to the current pulse of our situation. Meanwhile, Shing Lee's *A Rock* offers a more minimal approach to look at the struggle of a man fighting against his inner self and a force of nature. A nine-minute still framing of a man sitting in the middle of the sea trying to stay still against the wave, the act is a powerful metaphor which provokes deep-seated queries about the vulnerability we collectively embody. Both films offer powerful images and meditations on nature and being human. *Over Here?* by Zelia ZZ Tan builds up an urban tale where collages of city dwellers and the textures of pandemic scenes in the streets are juxtaposed against stylised dance sequences created by the director. Exploring the notion of flux, the director weaves multiple scenes together like a stream of consciousness.

Maurice Lai's *Maze* is very different in its aesthetic and nature from the three films mentioned earlier. Originally choreographed by Pewan Chow and Rosalind Newman in a theatrical setting, Chow and Newman took the original production to collaborate with renowned Hong Kong dance video director Lai to further explore how the work could be transformed into a filmic presentation. They have hoped to transform the work with alternative perspectives, reworking the dance production in the Nan Fung Cotton Mills, now known as The Mills, an art space developed as part of

an urban regeneration project led by Nan Fung Group which aimed to repurpose a heritage space into a multi-disciplinary contemporary art venue. Owing to the disconnection between the site's historical meaning and the original dance pieces, the adaptations of space for different dance segments and the subsequent cinematography is disorientating, despite many beautiful moments in how the framing of the dances work with the light and camera movement. As a whole, the filmic adaptation does not offer a new proposition and is noted as challenging for the audience to view a non-narrative dance performance being contained in a forty-eight-minute film documentation.

The idea of durationality and its different manifestations across the formats of a live theatrical performance and a filmic work is one very important element to be considered in adapting dance performance into a film. Direct translations that work to keep the dance intact for a new space might require a longer creative process to re-shape the whole choreography. In the case of *Maze*, the hybrid screening became a challenge, as without a narrative line and connection to the old Nam Fung Cotton Mills, the dance becomes disconnected and decontextualised. A forty-eight-minute non-stop dance with music, different camera movements, angles, and editing points cannot sustain the audience, especially when viewed from a computer screen. This iteration of *Maze* could perhaps serve as a point of further reflection to the presenters and creators looking into how live works and film works could be conceived when we meet the future norm of online screening platforms in the realm of the post-pandemic.

As a whole, for the four films of 'Local Focus', the artistic conversation

between the lens and the body are inevitably crucial in the final work itself, no matter if the technological intent is functional or artistic. When we look at dance film as a form, as a genre, we are using film as a medium to understand, to contain, to disrupt, and to frame dance as the content of the film, though not forgetting that the vessel to hold and process this content is a filmic medium with its own language, nature, and mode of transmission. The mismatch or miscommunication in artistic vision between creators of dance and film could be an interesting discourse if we explore the intersections of the two media when they are critically mediated. However, there is tremendous pressure to hold on to one's art form and familiar grounds from both fields, especially in mainstream and institutional projects.

Often, we could not equitably and ideally divide the visions and voices of both participants during the creative process. In most practices, whoever is given more decision-making responsibilities and powers is the one who initiated the project in the first place. In cases like *Over Here?* by Tan and *A Rock* by Lee, where the content of the film and the performance are both authored solely by the director, they own the image and the dance content of the film as the sole author. In this scenario, the author contains and explores both media in their own conception. However, in *Mountains, Seas, Panorama*, director Wong has conceived the project together with choreographer Blue Ka-wing from the very beginning, the sharing of the same starting point for the project allows for a more collaborative ideology. In the meantime, *Maze* as an adaptive work of a successful dance performance needs the most collaborative dialogue and



exchange between the artists amongst the four films of 'Local Focus'. As the authorship of the work could clearly be seen to be held by the original creators of the dance, it needs new imagination and further filmic intervention to transform the work for a new film perspective: what we can see is that as the director fully respects and wants to keep the originality of the dance as much as possible, he plays a more supportive than creative role in this work. Perhaps because there has not been any significant interferences and disruptions to each other's material, the work remains as a documentation of the dance, in my opinion.

This tension inherent to how the authorship, or rather artistic ownership, of the image in a film when the subject and content belongs to the choreographer was explored in the documentary *Being Jérôme Bel*, directed by Aldo Lee and Sima Khatami. Here I hope to reference this film, which was screened in *Jumping Frames 2020*, as an example that may offer an interesting insight for local creators who are working in the fields of dance and cinema, mainly because it aptly highlights the inherent tensions from the perspective of a documentarian vis-a-vis the documentary process in artistic interpretation – a commonly-faced issue we have witnessed. In one scene, we watch a suddenly tense situation in the process of filming during which Bel strongly objected to the way in which the filmmakers captured his work. So intensely displeased he was, he even threatened to forbid any usage of his images, his presence, as well as all the dance contents which already belonged to him. The disagreement provided an interesting tangent to look at the different perspectives in the eyes of choreographer and filmmaker. What might have seemed to be a disruption for the film project provides an

important insight for different discussion points, either to speak about the authorship or the perspective of both media, or the challenges of transposing traditional notion of hierarchy in film production into an inter-medial process, and even the power struggle between a filmmaker and a choreographer. This film thus provides a solid opportunity to open up discussion and consideration for those creators who are either working on an adaptive project, or in the dilemma of this power struggle during their collaboration between dance and film, demonstrated quite clearly in ‘Local Focus’.

Reflecting on the selection and presentation of the films in the Festival, alongside a growing consciousness of the lack of local content that could be part of the festival programming, the Festival is also in a transitory time to listen to both the existing local industry of making, as well as possible audience development of this hybrid art form. The sentiment to look into film content and the digital performance of a dance is now facing an exciting provocation to mutate, to expand, and to be newly contextualised after the deluge of digital contents previously inaccessible in the pre-pandemic past.

### **Case Study 3**

*Joyeux Noël*, choreographed and performed by CCDC resident artist Noel Pong and presented by CCDC in December 2020.

*Joyeux Noël* was first choreographed and performed by Pong in December 2020 as a two-part live-streamed performance, with the first part of the performance shot in a single take with the camerawork

of Ziv Chun. The camera movement was specifically rehearsed and choreographed, as a collaborative effort proposed between the choreographer and the camera person. Like a duet, Chun as the camera person has to move agilely to follow the flow of the choreography like a dancer. Though not presented as a duet featuring both artists on screen at the same time, the idea behind this proposition was re-imagined further by the then-newly appointed CCDC Artistic Director Yuri Ng as a duet work, which could be further developed for future presentations. This collaborative method did not come immediately and naturally to Pong's practice and choreographic style. In her past dance film works, she focused mainly on the choreography and the performance of the dancers while the videographer was given total freedom as technical support in documenting her work, according to Pong in an interview.

In the second part of the performance, three additional professional stills photographers, together with video director and main camera person Chun, joined hands to present Pong's piece from different angles through their phone lenses. In this specific project, Yuri Ng invited three stills photographers to participate as extra contributors of perspectives through iPhone video recording. Instead of the usual heavy duty broadcasting camera equipment, the use of iPhone had intended meaning as it enabled the usage of Zoom as a streaming medium, through which the audience could watch four unique shots simultaneously and interpret Pong's choreography from multiple angles. Viewers had the choice of their preferred frame or to watch through all four lenses at the same time. In hindsight, Ng hoped to invite the audience to take an expansive look at the interactions between dancing bodies and cameras

through popular culture and low-tech creation. In the context of the technological accessibility of our current time, what becomes of creativity on a human scale and its impact on our relationship with the world on a daily basis could perhaps be incorporated into the ways we connect with the audience in times like this.

One similarity between *Joyeux Noël* and the *Since Our Last Goodbye* series is that both projects shared the same director, Ziv Chun, who proposed the use of live-streaming as the technological medium to host the performance. Unlike Kwok and Hui's incidental and improvisational way of approaching their performance, Pong had the choreography fixed to all lighting cues and positions in the black box space. In this regard, *Joyeux Noël* can be considered to have a more functional intent with its usage of technology than the *Since Our Last Goodbye* series which considered the device as central to the artistic vision of the work.

Looking beyond the collaboration of Chun and Pong, this streaming performance is perhaps a more direct translation of the pandemic showcase in which the Zoom platform is repurposed as a four-channel presentation mode to provide multiple perspectives and interpretations to both audience and creators. At the time of writing this essay, the pandemic situation has gradually calmed down in Hong Kong, with live performances recovering and flourishing after a long lockdown. Many artists whom I interviewed for the purpose of this piece have not had a chance to revisit their temporary re-mediated work during 2020's pandemic intensity. Perhaps this transitional performance-making approach is temporary, and we will need a much longer period of time to

observe the post-pandemic transformation, if any. Examining how dance presentations have been re-imagined through moving image making, we are still contemplating the unknown alchemy from the related creative practitioners. As such, *Joyeux Noël* could be considered as holding a more functional intent in its digital adaptation. Originally choreographed as a live performance, before the radical transformation into a digitally streamed work with additional considerations from a filmic perspective has altered the choreography for future developments in screendance creation for Pong. This new artistic proposal has been fruitful for the artist. The reflection of this choreographic expansion of Pong in such filmic consideration of the dance was further challenged by Ng to look outside the box for the next developmental phase of *Joyeux Noël*. This tangent addresses one of my key concerns directly, particularly in my exploration of a new imagination arising from the hybridity of dance and moving image manifestations.

#### **Case Study 4**

Ivy Tsui's *My Life As A Dancer*, Sudhee Liao's *Hermetic Diode*, and Wayson Poon's *A Letter to Father* of the 'Hong Kong Jockey Club Contemporary Dance Series 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Series' presented by Hong Kong Arts Festival 2021.

These three projects shared the same premise and element: they were conceived and commissioned as live theatre performances as part of the Hong Kong Jockey Club Contemporary Dance Series 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary programme produced by the Hong Kong Arts Festival 2021, which in total featured fourteen works. Owing to the limits of this essay, I will

focus on the three mentioned works, all of which featured the same filmic collaborator, Vincent Ip, who filmed and edited the subsequent footage into the final presented works.

Taking up the role of production director, film consultant, and artistic collaborator to six of the works in the series, Ip was a consultant hired by the Hong Kong Arts Festival to assist the choreographers in transferring their work from live performance to film. When I asked him about the process and obstacles of collaborating with different choreographers in this adaptation process, Ip shared his view about the different perspectives of live performance versus film production in relation to a common language, concepts of time, and spatial orientation. He explained that the openness and timeframe for live performance were much broader and stretched over a much longer sense of time compared to video presentations. From his experiences, a ratio of 1:4 in condensation is needed when we transfer a live performance into a film presentation. This is because we have less patience for screen-based materials and the director's specific perspective of which is being framed, whereas in live performance, we, as the audience, can more freely interpret sensorially what is happening. Spatially, Ip also stressed that the cinematic apparatus meant that we could now look at a work from different distances. While the distance of the audience to the dancer is fixed to a proscenium configuration, limited to where your seat is, the distance of the camera from the dancer is in constant flux depending on the shot size and intensity that the creator hopes to convey and achieve. Considered as a form of time-based media, live performance generally has a linear progression, which differs from the construction of time in

film where the sense of time, emotion, and narrative are constructed through editing either the montage or the mise-en-scene of the camera. Specific to each scenario and vision of the dance-makers, Ip has thus gone through different processes collaborating with Tsui, Liao, and Poon.

In *My Life As A Dancer*, the camera is more observational and still because of the nature of Tsui's choreographic structure – to portray the performative act of her textual presentation as the dancer in her work. It was important to take this minimal and archival approach so that the camera did not overtake the performance. There was an interesting observation from Tsui that she recalled while sharing about her filming process, where she contemplated the way in which a stage was spatially divided and defined with specific perspectives in her practice. The training of both the audience and performer(s) inhabiting the space of proscenium stage has long been rooted in the traditions of classical theatre, while the spatial concept of cinema could be quite fluid, hence not a centre to be anchored. While this encounter of spatial difference appears to be basic and fundamental, it is not a perspective to be easily articulated unless by experienced collaborators during the actual process of creation. Before completing the adaptation of the work, Tsui also questioned the notion of an archival approach which she had doubted previously, a valid concern when envisioning the work as a collaborative film piece as opposed to a direct documentation.

Going beyond the archival approach, *A Letter to Father* by Wayson Poon was more documentarian in how it followed the choreographer's journey in mourning the loss of his father. Through connecting the inherent

spirituality of the natural environment with the voice of a *nanyin* singer, the work served as an intimate conversation between father and son, between a body and nature, and between a singer and the dancer. While originally proposed as a ten-minute long-take featuring a duet between a singer and a dancer, as it progressed, the team decided to expand the camera movement into different perspectives and open up a more imaginative logic to the film. Ip's participation in Poon's work involved a more improvisational approach as well as actively shifting his own presence as a camera person, editor, and observer. In response to Poon's original choreography for a black box space with the physical chair owned by his late father, the duo expanded their filmic imagination to include a more spiritual encounter with nature, leading to the replacement of the chair with the metaphorical branches which the choreographer found onsite. Subsequently, the visual imagery of the mountain and forest did lend a more mystic tenor to the final piece.

Depending on what each choreographer needed or wanted, Ip's position likewise shifted. For *Hermetic Diode*, choreographer Sudhee Liao provided Ip with much leeway to re-interpret her work. As a result, Ip took the liberty of partially re-situating her work in an actual alley way instead of a fully filmed production in the theatre space, alongside intervening in the choreography through the introduction of different filmic elements such as camera movement and perspectives, especially the macro view of the choreography and body which had not been feasible in live performances. In the process of creating the film, both Liao and Ip adopted a more traditional filmic approach to the creation: working on storyboards and scripting the scenes, as well as deconstructing the



dance with different shots. It is important to note that Liao has already had prior experience working on film production in her previous works, and this prior experience may in turn serve as a prerequisite for Liao's furthering of her choreographic practice through a filmic language. With the final film presentation almost entirely remade, *Hermetic Diode* is perhaps one of the most film-influenced adaptations among all the works in the series.

Looking at these three works and collaborative processes, it is clear that the completion of these adaptations did not come from equal artistic initiations of the filmic propositions from the very beginning. Ip's role as a supporting agent helped to address many unforeseen gaps and expectations between collaborations of moving image practitioners and dance practitioners in the usual sense, when both claimed an equal stake to authorial primacy and power. This case study potentially indicates how successful collaborations dealing with filmic creation in the performing arts could take place in the future. However, this also brings up an existential question of whether any medium needed to be placed in a supportive role even during supposed partnerships. Nevertheless, it is exciting to witness such an unprecedented bumper crop of filmic dance works in Hong Kong. Though some are more successful than the others, it provides an opportunity for the choreographers to tap into the expertise of a supportive film production infrastructure, subtracting the director-centric mode of cinema-making while at the same time eliminating the intimidation of having to utilise a previously unknown film language. In any case, this may well be the most useful takeaway for future projects in promoting audio-visual dance works.

### Case Study 5

*My Unlimited Stage* presented by Artscompana (April 2021).

*My Unlimited Stage* is a dance video project working with audio descriptions, the idea of which was meant as an intervention to broaden access to differently-abled audiences and be more inclusive. The project comprises four video works by four dancers from different age groups with varying levels of experiences and backgrounds, created and produced by Artscompana, a charitable art company founded by people with disabilities, to promote inclusive art. As a platform to promote understanding of people with disabilities, the company often creates programmes with the intention of integrating artists of different disabilities within a professional setting. In the context of *My Unlimited Stage*, the project involves an elderly dancer, a wheelchair-bound dancer, a visually-impaired dancer, and a young dancer to share their dance and life experience in encountering dance.

Consuming the four video works together with audio descriptions, the audience is prompted to experience the aural and visual elements of filmmaking from a different position. While community dance endeavours are commonly examined and viewed from a position of empathy and social sensitivity instead of more formal, and physically-demanding, definitions of artistry in usual cases, especially in live performance where the audience focuses less on the artistic effort of the work, or its discourse and conceptual exploration, in favour of a more generous reading that celebrates the participants, the filmic

presentation of these four solo dances has deviated and re-conditioned the conventional perspective of community arts in this specific project, which is a notable feat for projects of such nature.

### **Conclusion**

The exploration of the different aesthetic dimensions of presenting dance through the moving image in this essay are but a fraction of the observations I have made, based on some of the digital presentations from the dance community that I have encountered between mid-2020 and early 2021. They constitute part of the spectrum of works that explore how ideas of ‘dance’ and the ‘moving image’ could be re-defined or re-produced as a mode of presentation and manifested as a clear product of the circumstances.

As a long-time dance filmmaker, facilitator, and curator, I am interested in how this process, which originated as a consequence of the constraints posed by the context of a crisis, could expand new imaginations and possibilities for practitioners from both film and dance, and facilitate productive conversations and collaborations between dance and film organically.

In *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*, Carrie Lambert-Beatty noted that ‘[a] dance film is a captured, remembered version of performance’.<sup>1</sup> Memory and remembrance are often poetic, metaphysical, and deceptive. If the remembrance of a performance could be revisited,

---

<sup>1</sup> Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (U.S.: The MIT Press, 2008), 53.

re-presented, rewatched, and replicated to an endless audience, it could challenge the ephemerality that is the fundamental nature of live performance. In this sense, the making of a mediated performance relies more on a transformative discourse rather than a digital discourse. Just as how television-based performances influenced the viewing of theatre in America in 1960s, the idea of mediation has expanded much further into experimentations on how technology could and has intervened in the lives of ordinary people without taking away the essence and importance of live performance. Likewise, while the development and proliferation of machines have modified human's collective thinking process and somatic routines in daily life, they did not change the fundamental human physiology nor its functions. The thesis of digital transformation comments on the process of artistic paradigm shift between changes in the social condition and evolutions in the somatic environment brought forth by the ever-shifting technological relations present in our daily life.

Even if the contemporary flood of images and the simultaneity of their circulation have led to a kind of numbness in terms of consumption, I believe that there can be a more active and practical approach to looking beyond the static mediated image – to explore not just visuality but an altered physicality. There are, of course, more complex relations between memories and the moving image, the individual and collective. Such relations surround the emotional bonds that we form with these moving images which harbour the risk of forgetting that the body, as the producer and recipient of these images, is always present. Spaces, in which a simultaneity of images is projected, can be perceived from different axes related to not just the continuity and flow of the images

themselves but also to the wear and tear of the traditional viewer's point of view. In this format, the work is activated by the viewer, who has to move in order to measure the space – a reality constructed when a picture becomes an illusion of movement. In short, I am not at all worried about mass media supplanting live performance culture.

From antiquity till now, dance has always been an essential, if not fundamental, element to constructing our identity, to negotiating our own humanity, to fertility, to rituals, and to daily living. This is evident from not just the remaining cave drawing of our prehistoric selves, the existing rituals in many cultures, but also our social life across all human existence. Cinema as a reflection and abstraction of life, in a concentrated, condensed way, cannot avoid the existence and power of dance. The power of body language and how the somatic self speaks will continue to transform the poetics of cinema as an alternative to dialogues, through which the language of text can never become ideological. Digital presentations that draw on the life force of dance could be transcendental in many ways, and not at all culminating in the potential death of live performance.

I recall Philip Auslander's *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* in which he discusses the binary relationship between a live performance and a mediated reproduction of a live production; there, he questions the common assumption that the live event is 'real' and that mediatised events are secondary and somehow artificial reproduction of the real. In the era of the audio-visual hybrid, the boundary between various forms of practices has become fluid and intangible, which lends

itself to an exciting array of possibilities in creative outputs and viewing norms. Particular to the pandemic context, a rising urgency to adopt the moving image has led to emergences in various forms. Dance film, as a crucial sub-genre in film history, is undergoing a transformation and slowly developing an innovative language of its own. It has transcended the documentation or mediation of dance or performance in many aspects. In the 2021 edition of the Jumping Frames Festival, my team and I constantly found ways to initiate possible expansions in understanding and to contemplate a new dimension of 'dance film' in its methodology and discourse. Therefore, this immediate transference from the medium of dance to that of film in the rush of the pandemic could become a touchpoint for re-examining and re-discovering how we look at and experience live performance with a more progressive and non-biased approach. After all, the truth, the fact, is that the conditions, situations, and outfalls of the pandemic will continue to affect our lives and society.

As a dance film curator, I have observed the lack of artistic reflections and multiplicity of this hybrid genre in Hong Kong for a long time. More often than not, we could not see the necessity of collaborations or the enormous potential of exploring how to expand the peripheries of each medium. The 'dance film', and its twin 'screendance', are a hybrid re-organisation of dance and film media that has come a long and exciting way internationally, but not so much in Asia yet. It is not just about the collaborative process between two different media, but the idea that the form of each medium could be challenged and transformed to create a new system of communication and meaning and shifts the ways we encounter each art form. Perhaps the pandemic will change this, even

amidst not well-founded fears of the potential death of live performance as an aftereffect of the development of mass media productions of dance. However, it is always problematic when we categorise dance film as a facet that is part of the bigger market of the film world. Though we see the potentiality of dance films rising, the presence of a market is not quite a certain existence yet. More than that, I see it predominantly as a necessary progression for the world of dance, because the accessibility and multiplicity of a screening can and will expand the exposure of dance creations and performances across the globe on a far larger scale. Beside its transnational and trans-temporal potentials, the medium of film also preserves the ephemerality of dance and body in its natural habitat. In 2020, we saw an overwhelming number of creations of this nature in Hong Kong, and gradually but certainly, almost every performing artist would have to accept the new challenges posed by this new norm in the long run. The plague is not going away – but perhaps, this will lead to some positive, productive conversation on how we can move forward together, on the streets and on the screens.