

《Between Voice and Communication: On Linguistic Performativity in *On Set in the City, Works by Yu Cheng Ta*》

Therefore, one has to admit, before any dissociation of language and speech, code and message, etc. (and everything that goes along with such a dissociation), a systematic production of differences, the production of a system of differences – a *différance* – within whose effects one eventually, by abstraction and according to determined motivations, will be able to demarcate a linguistics of language and a linguistics of speech, etc.

—Jacques Derrida¹

On Set in the City, Works by Yu Cheng Ta exhibits the artistic works created by Yu Cheng Ta during the period of his participation in the artist-in-residence programs in various cities, including Aomori in Japan, Wellington and Auckland in New Zealand, and Macao. The series of his works clearly demonstrate Yu's deep concern about the performativity of language.

Voice and Words

Whether in **Ventriloquists: Introduction** (2008) or in **Ventriloquists: Liang Mei-Lan and Emily Su** (2009), the artist focuses on the effects of estrangement and astonishment brought about by the contrast of pronunciation and grammatical structure between a native speaker and a non-native speaker while the latter is speaking in a language unfamiliar to him/her.

To help viewers whose parent language is not Mandarin and Min Nan dialect, the aforementioned video works are purposefully presented with subtitles. By **Ventriloquists: Introduction**, the viewer firstly hears from the headphones the instructions given by the person dressed in black (at the upper part of the screen), whose mother tongue is Mandarin. Subsequently, the viewer will hear the repetition of the instructions mimicked by the ventriloquist (at the lower part of the screen). A native speaker of Mandarin and Min Nan dialect will immediately discern a vast disparity between the original instructions of the person dressed in black (expressed in the subtitles) and the repetition performed by the ventriloquist. In other words, the ventriloquist easily causes misunderstandings, as he/she has no grasp of what the original instructions meant. Contrary to the

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, translated by Yu Bi Ping, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2004, p. 33.

ventriloquist's incomprehension of the meaning of the instructions in **Ventriloquists: Introduction**, the two main characters in **Ventriloquists: Liang Mei Lan and Emily Su**, as two foreign brides married to Taiwanese men, are basically able to comprehend what the instructors said. Although, in terms of grammatical structure, some incorrect and awkward usage frequently occurs in their speech, the two foreign brides, as shown in the video, seem to be capable of communicating with the native speakers effortlessly.

The two early works by Yu provide us with a new linguistic space that creates possibilities between voice and meanings. Language is neither voice nor words. To help us understand this point, the artist deliberately makes a literal translation of the repeater's incorrect grammatical structure into English. Nevertheless, language has to rely on voice and words to incarnate and structuralize itself. Therefore, voice and words, as two media that materialize language, perform firstly not the function of "providing meanings to language", but that of "recording linguistic traces". In terms of voice, **Ventriloquists: Introduction** reveals how a non-native speaker records and converts the words, namely the basic units, of a language, when that language is unfamiliar to him/her. This process represents a linguistic construction completed from bottom (words) to top (viewer's comprehension of the linguistic meanings as a whole). On the contrary, **Ventriloquists: Liang Mei Lan and Emily Su** displays a scenario in which the speakers, who almost completely understand the linguistic meanings, unconsciously ignore the correct pronunciation of words and grammatical structure in their speech in a top-down manner.

In **Ventriloquists: Introduction**, the materiality of words hinders the linguistic communication, while the communication in **Ventriloquists: Liang Mei Lan and Emily Su** seems going quite successfully because of the good match between meanings and language. This clearly represents an important phenomenon: in terms of communication, the topological distance between language and meanings is much smaller than that between language and words/voice.

Duality

By using much more traditional terms to tentatively categorize meaning as "spiritual" and words/voice as "material", we may propose the following argument about the two video works. The artist is consciously aware of the spiritual and material dimensions of language, and then he juxtaposes the two dimensions, namely the duality, of language in order to achieve

the goal of “intervening a (linguistic) system within that system”,² an idea suggested by Jacques Derrida.

The artist presents the duality of language in the other two of his video works, entitled **A Practice of City Guide: Auckland** (2011) and **Reading the City: Wellington** (2011), with different approaches. For example, in **A Practice of City Guide: Auckland**, the artist acts as a tour guide and provides the viewer with the information about a variety of scenic spots. Through the videotaped scenes, the artist reminds the viewer: you are not participating in a real guided tour, but just watching the prerecorded scenes in a tour guidance video. After the videotaped scenes comes the other part of the work. The artist directly shows the cue cards on the screen and replays the video. It enables the viewer to compare the contents in the cue cards with that the artist is actually saying. If the viewer compares the two different settings of each scenic spot in **A Practice of City Guide: Auckland**, he/she can easily discern that the artist either often glances at the cue cards to help himself remember his lines, or makes errors or even stutters from time to time while reading the cue cards. This phenomenon not only illustrates the significant influence of the materiality of words, but also gives prominence to what Niklas Luhmann once claimed: awareness must rely on media such as words or voice to engage in communication.³ Therefore, as far as awareness is concerned, a more unfamiliar thing constitutes a more formidable obstacle. To overcome such an obstacle more quickly, we have to differentiate the correct words and voice from those being misread or incomprehensible. It implies that we have to ignore the material dimension of words and voice and instead focus on their spiritual one. This is exactly the question that Sigmund Freud tried to address by consciously using a typewriter as the metaphor for the structure and function of the psyche (die Psyche).⁴

This question requires much more urgent attention in the digital era. As **Reading the City: Wellington** demonstrates, the materiality of words is still an unbearable burden for intelligence

² Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985, p. 329.

³ Niklas Luhmann, *Wie ist Bewußtsein an Kommunikation beteiligt?*, in: *Soziologische Aufklärung 6: Die Soziologie und der Mensch*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005, pp. 38–54.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Freud and the Scene of Writing*, translated by Zhang Ning, excerpted from *Writing and Difference*, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2001, pp. 357–416.

machine such as an online translator. We will clearly observe this situation if we compare the source information with the translated one cranked out by an online translator. To be more specifically, an online translator can never accomplish what Liang Mei Lan and Emily Su have gone through in **Ventriloquists: Liang Mei Lan and Emily Su**, that is, the process of moving from material dimension to spiritual dimension (transcending words and voice to reach meanings).⁵

Performativity and Expression

The artist attempts to seal the gap existed in the aforementioned duality and investigate the origin of the high degree of fault tolerance we observed in **Ventriloquists: Liang Mei Lan and Emily Su**. To achieve these goals, the artist uses himself as a medium for language, and then internalizes the dualities between voice and words, meanings and language, and materiality and spirituality into his own usage of language. In other words, he forces himself to re-experience the journey of internalizing a language unfamiliar to him into his own one. The three phases of linguistic transformation (Japanese→Romanization→a mixture of Kanji and Romanization) in **A Practice of Singing: Japanese Songs** (2012) represents the symbolization of words' materiality. However, we should be very cautious about this phenomenon and not to equate symbolization with signification. "Symbolization" refers to words as a pure difference from voice, but symbolized words have not become "language with significance" yet. On the contrary, "signification" means that the words and voice as symbols have been assigned meanings during communication. The artist, who does not speak Japanese, makes a description of his finding in **A Practice of Singing: Japanese Songs**. "It seems that I was performing, but in fact I was not. I was genuinely expressing myself." The difference between the performativity in **A Practice of Singing: Japanese Songs** and the self-description of the artist enable us to demarcate the performer in that work, namely the language per se, but not the artist. As a medium for language, the artist can even argue that "the language performed me rather than I performed the language" in that work. In other words, the artist can be identified as a product produced amid the pleats of language. In this context, as far as "expression" is concerned, a symbolized language already contains an adequate degree of fault tolerance.

⁵ For a brief discussion on this issue, please see *Language and the Internet*, by David Crystal, translated by Guo Gui Chun and Lui Quan Ming, Shanghai: Shanghai Scientific & Technological Education Publishing House, 2001. (This material is now somewhat outdated, but still worth reading.)

From his previous works, we notice that the artist already identified the existence of the “expression” level in-between “completely incomprehension” and “interactive communication with mutual comprehension” through the performative exercise of “singing”. However, “expression” is not “communication”. Therefore, as symbols, the words and voice in **A Practice of Singing: Japanese Songs** are not necessary to carry the meanings comprehensible to the artist. In this case, we have to ponder on what “facilitates the symbolized expression and establishes communication” if symbols are merely a way of expression among others.

Scene and Presence

Since Chinese is used in Macao and Taiwan, the artist can easily communicate with the local viewers there. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the artist shifts his focus away from the linguistic issues and starts to ponder on the question of “what facilitates the symbolized expression and establishes communication”. We are surprised by the exhibition brochure because we find in it that the artist approaches this question with a closed triple structure consisted of “subject”, “language”, and “scene”. The three components are interconnected in that closed structure. While the “dynamism” question framed above tentatively serves “subject” and “language”, “scene” becomes the focal point of the artist’s new creation entitled ‘**Fisherman’s Wonderland**’ (2013), currently on exhibit at the Tap Seac Gallery. This work undoubtedly represents the artist’s first attempt at the shift of focal point in his creative exploration.

However, we will be probably wondering how “dynamism” relates to “scene”? **Fisherman’s Wonderland** is quite different from Yu Cheng Ta’s previous works that focused on the linguistic dimension in interactive communication. In **Fisherman’s Wonderland**, the artist broadens the scope of “communication” to encompass economy.⁶ By doing so, he seeks to reveal the nature of “desire”, which serves as an intrinsic dynamism that kick-start the casino economy. The artist places photos of numerous casino entrances beside the video projection, because the symbolic dimension remains a necessary but not primary consideration in this work. In this case, what is actually the prerequisite for the emergence of desire? In **Fisherman’s Wonderland**, the artist equates “original

⁶ For theoretical explanation about this point, please see *Die Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft* (Social Economic), by Niklas Luhmann, translated and annotated by Tang Zhi Jie and Lu Gui Xian, Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2009.

scene (Urszene)”⁷ with “presence”, and compresses the casino economy in a direct–marketing scenario. This approach reveals that, for the emergence of desire, it must presuppose a system, and the closeness of that system can be achieved only in a more encompassing scene (in **Fisherman’s Wonderland**, this refers to more encompassing time and social scenes) and, in the meantime, the system cannot be reduced by the scene. In other words, only when the system and the more encompassing scene⁸ constitute a set of difference in which they cannot reduce each other, will various desires emerge within the system through the perturbation (in Luhmann’s term, Störung) that the scene imposes upon the system. **Fisherman’s Wonderland** clearly illustrates that subject participates in the casino economy by adopting desire as a medium. In sum, the exercise of “performance” is accomplished and communication established at where the aforementioned triple structure exists.

Finally, let us contextualize **On Set in the City, Works by Yu Cheng Ta** into the social–historical structure that nurtured the artist. After the lifting of martial law in the late 1980s, Taiwanese society has continued to transform the disputes over ethnic and national identities into a linguistic question, which prompts Yu Cheng Ta (and many artists of his generation) to enquire into the origin and mixture of language from the angle of performativity. The exhibition venue and theme of **On Set in the City, Works by Yu Cheng Ta** is in and about Macao this time. The artist is therefore able to glance back at his homeland Taiwan in an unhurried and thoughtful manner.

In this way, this exhibition makes its debut in its homeland, Taiwan.

⁷ We adopt this concept from Sigmund Freud.

⁸ We may replace the term “more encompassing scene” with “environment”, suggested by Niklas Luhmann.