The New “Theatricality” in Performance and Media Arts

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1. INTRODUCTION

The situation both of performance art and media art in mainland China has changed when compared to the 1990s. There has emerged, to some extent, an amalgamation of performance and media installation. Those go far towards the look of a theatre performance and dramatic representation in the new media installations but happened in the museum or outdoors public open space. This amalgamated union may point a new creative direction to express Chinese artists' aesthetic thinking and feeling. So, the purpose of this article is to answer the question: What is the new “Theatricality”? A question of this kind has to be answered in three stages.

2. WHAT THE “THEATRICALITY” IS

The key word (in this case “Theatricality”) is a word mentioned by Michael Fried in his essay entitled: *The Art and Objecthood* (1967). He worked out the term ‘Objecthood’, which is the state or issue that the modernist painting and sculpture may have to face, according to the logical development of formalism theory proposed by art critic Clemente Greenberg. Moreover, from Fried’s perspective, “there is a war going on between theatre and modernist painting, between the theatricality and the pictorial.” (Fried 1995 [1967], p.135)

In order to understand the meaning of theatricality, we may need to enumerate the two chief characteristics of theatricality from his article.

To begin with, the experience of being surrounded by works and forced to face is a way to understand minimalist aesthetics. This experience is a kind of theatrical illusion for Fried, an aesthetic constructed by objects, an alternative drama. Fried invokes the car-driving experience of Tony Smith gone onto an unfinished turnpike at night as an explanation for how the audience experiences minimalist works.

The driving experience stimulated Smith's interest in appreciating: if the work done for art was framed to show its pictorial, the audience could only appreciate the picture effect in the frame; if it could not be framed, it would have to change to another thing like duration. In the context of theatrical illusion, if there is no audience, the work is incomplete. Theatricality is the essence of theatrical illusion, which involves the process of experience as an unmarked form to identify situations. Fried claimed that the Minimalist espousal “a plea for a new genre of theatre; and theatre is now the negation of art.” (Fried 1995 [1967], p.125) The new genre of theatre is the situation involved the beholders and works. So theatricality is presence.

And the other profitable way of theorizing the characteristic of theatricality is to compare it with the traditional theatre. In fact, both of them involve the experience of the spectator, who participates in the time and space of the theatre scene constructed by art forms such as light and images. The dissimilarities between the two, which from the view of subject-object relationship between works and beholders, is simply that there exists an apparent paradox in theatricality. In Fried's theatricality, the original intention of the situation created by the works is to let the audience experience it in their own way. The reality is that when the spectator enters the situation, the works let them alone by distancing them. Fried believes that in many cases, the size of the arrangement of objects is the way in which the work isolates the audience, even though this isolation is still a kind of spiritual communication. However, the theatre pleases spectators, and pleases in the way of amusement, so it is never let the spectators alone.

3. CASES OF AMALGAMATION

Since the early 1990s, the art scene created by the way of computer-controlled has been widely used

in the context of performance art in western country. In China, however, the amalgamation of media and performance art has only begun in recent years. In order to make the theme of new "theatricality" clearer, I would like to cite two examples of this kind of blended creation.

Figure 1: *Ten-party Space Device*. File Photo: Lin Wanshan.

The first example is *Ten-party Space Device* (Lin Wanshan 2018), an interactive work performed by a single actor. It is displayed in outdoor public space and divided into two parts: one is performance; the other is interaction with audience. In the first half of the work, it is actually the medium performance of image mixed with dance. The dancer performs according to the moving geometric image, and his act cooperates with the music. After the performance, audiences can enter the device and wear brain sensors that look like glasses to experience. Brain thinking will be converted into geometric images showed on the screen. Its name "Ten-party" represents ten directions in the five-dimensional space. The whole work clearly conveys the meaning of Zen Buddhism, a kind of Chinese Buddhism, which expresses the change of people's thinking of self-cultivation in real life.

Figure 2: *A Dream Back Peony Pavilion*. File Photo: Bao Wanyi.

The second example is *A Dream Back Peony Pavilion* (group of Zhai Jianxin 2018), an interactive work performed by group actors. The work is displayed in the interior space of the museum. It is also divided into two parts: performance and interaction with audience. It uses holographic imaging, human-computer interaction and other techniques to design the whole performing. Six interactive activities are designed in the progress of experience according to the story background of Peony Pavilion, which is a legend (script) of the

Ming Dynasty in ancient China. This play tells the story of Du Liniang, who died sadly, turned into a ghost in real life to find a lover, and finally resurrected and reunited with her lover. The audience can watch the performance and interact directly with the work during the non-performance period.

The artist invites professional actors to perform, arousing the emotions of audience to participate in the interaction in advance. Before the audience's imagination comes into being, the performance accurately shows what the artist wants to express, which may stimulate the audience's imagination and make it more impressive compared with a mess of no idea. Those works last about a week, provide time and space for the audience to interact and experience for the aim to recall the memories of audience themselves and rethink the previous performance to generate a new imagination.

4. THE NEW ABSENCE

In each of the above examples, the performance acts can be seen as a guide for beholders in the whole process of exhibition, providing the audience with a preconceived scope of imagination, at the same time, removing the spectator's fear of entering the installation. There are three scenes, one is the installation itself, the other is the scene created by the performance, and the third is the scene of the audience participation and interaction. After the performance, the audience will replace the role of the performer as a new subject. Therefore, the act of performance will become a kind of absence in the process of interaction. This absence re-represents the disappearance and emptiness mentioned by Peggy Phelan. It can only exist in the form of memory, which is one of the characteristics of the new "Theatricality".

The work still awaits the appearance of the audience, no longer in an isolated manner, but in acceptance and tolerance. Performing is the key, and media such as lighting, image, and interactive design are the medium to convey and record information. The works do not cater to the consumption market, and still do not contain entertainment factors of traditional drama. The memory of the disappeared performance becomes the centre or focus of the work; in other words, the search for the possible to reframe the performance becomes the meaning itself.

5. REFERENCES

Fried, M. (1995) *Minimal art: a critical anthology*. University of California Press, Berkeley.