

Perform : State : Interrogate

Performance Studies International [PSi]#10

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By Matthew Isaac Cohen

Performance studies as a field dances between the universal and the particular, the applied and the theoretical. Theorists address human behaviour and communication, the relation between practices past and present, and argue about performance's ephemerality, the distinction between performance in technology and performance as art and the transformative possibilities of cyberculture. Most scholars are also ardent practitioners or spectators and their writings tend to be self-critical. This personal engagement lends a particularistic edge to the field. PSi conferences have thus far been occasions for the studied affirmation of core disciplinary concerns, and at the same time raucous concomitances of incompatible perspectives and styles.

Asian theatre, dance, ritual and festivity have been important foci in performance studies since the field's emergence at the intersection of theatre and anthropology in the 1970s. Performance studies have a vital interest in issues of interculturalism and globalisation; Asia has provided test cases for theories coming from Europe, America and Australia. As an academic discipline, however, performance studies remains little known in Asia. PSi#10 brought Asia to the fore, recalling the field's origin while problematising the legacy of Orientalism and cultural imperialism. The organisers saw PSi#10 as an opportunity "to bring the field of performance studies to the attention of researchers, theorists, artists and activists across diverse practices and disciplines in the 'Asian' region, while introducing the current state of 'Asian' performance theory and practice to researchers, theorists, artists and activists from other regions".

The organisers compelled presenters to be reflexive, requesting papers to question how 'Asia' is constructed through cultural and social performances in the region and beyond. Discussions and interventions around the imperatives of perform, state and interrogate to do with art, academic discourse, and everyday life were cross-cut with dialogues on the arts of statecraft, power plays performed on global stages, the multifarious roles of states in arts and culture, and

the personal responsibility of artists and scholars to interrogate the dramaturgy of hegemony and repression in work and play.

At stake at PSi#10 was the conceit of PSi's lower case 'i'. When the organisation was launched in 1995, the postmodernesque 'i' was intended to mark the paucity of non-Anglophonic academics in the organisation and to remind us, in Peggy Phelan's words, of "the danger inherent in taking one's own 'I' or 'eye' as a coherent and whole perspective on performance, a term and activity that refuses totalizing activities". Would Singapore's resolute internationalism and cosmopolitanism challenge PSi's orthographic parochialism and playful flippancy?

Local density and transnational discourse

The conference succeeded in bringing together different streams in art and academia. Few from East or South Asia were present, but PSi#10 was a major meeting for those interested in the theatres of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, indexed in paper sessions on state censorship in Singapore and Malaysia; Malaysian youth theatre; Thai queer performance; Indonesian postcolonial theatre; puppets and masks in Indonesia and Malaysia; translation in Southeast Asian theatre and music; and a host of individual papers in more general panels and sessions. An interest group that ran over four days concerned itself with 'festival cultures' internationally, but took the Singapore Arts Festival as its special focus. The conference attracted Southeast Asian performance artists who both spoke about and performed their work.

Southeast Asian presentations were characterised by a 'local density' of shared memories, common referents and languages. General discussions addressed the staging of American global imperialism, performative aspects of terrorism, the fetishisation of 9/11 images in photography and performance, and the impenetrability of Anglophonic critical theory to non-native English speakers. Singaporean auteur director Ong Keng Sen explained why his intercultural theatre no longer kowtows to 'politically correct' tenets while performance studies professors from the U.S., U.K. and Australia held court and proclaimed on the state of the field. Sometimes the dialogues merged, but more often they were distinct.

Cultural nationalism, subversion, unease

The convening of a major international performance conference in Singapore can be read in cultural nationalist terms as part and parcel of the city-state's bid to establish itself as an international centre of

media, design and the arts. Reportedly, S\$200 million have been earmarked by the government to remake Singapore into a 'vibrant Asian creative hub' over the next five years. Early signs of Singapore's cultural turn include the opening of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay (October 2002); the world premiere of Robert Wilson's Indonesian dance-theatre spectacle, *I La Galigo* (February 2004); and the construction of the film studio Lucasfilm Animation Singapore (announced August 2004).

The Singaporean contingent within PSI's organising committee was, from the beginning, largely composed of artists and activists associated with fringe and independent organisations, such as The Substation and TheatreWorks, rather than mainstream academics or government officials. Certain elements of the conference were easily accommodated into the Singaporean state's vision of creativity and culture, while others were problematic.

Performance studies styles itself as a subversive anti-discipline, emphasizing the plasticity of the self and the mutability of social communities, with a libertarian political streak. PSI session organisers issued 'provocations' rather than briefs; presenters were dissuaded from reading papers and encouraged to improvise dialogically; facilitators brought conference delegates on city tours designed to provoke reflection on the channels of social performance that 'multicultural Singapore' uses to construct itself.

The divergence between state and scholarly cultural models came to a head when the conference's licensing permit was nearly revoked less than a week before the conference was to start. The hurried collection of passport details and travel itineraries was mandated, and the conference organisers unwillingly became extensions of the Singaporean state. Performance artists were forced to adhere to prepared texts, forbidden to perform outside designated spaces, and prohibited from touching sensitive topics or displaying nudity. W. Christiawan, having taken off his Indonesianist nationalist garb of batik shirt and peci cap, rubbed his body with self-induced vomit, but in the sterile environment of an air-conditioned theatre nobody could smell his egestion or respond sympathetically. His work became an empty spectacle, drained of particularity or involvement.

Organisers joked that 'Feeling Uncomfortable' was the theme of Psi#II (to be hosted by Brown University in 2005) and not the theme of this year's conference. But the presence of state intervention in a conference probing issues in interrogation and the state inevitably evoked unease, suspicion and surveillance phobia.

Inexorably international?

Ray Langenbach, a Malaysia-based artist-academic and conference organiser, argued at the outset that performance studies' internationalization was 'inexorable' and suggested that "a decision to elevate the 'I' be seen as a testament to the capacity of performance studies to enfranchise new publics or to its cultural and institutional rampancy". Much debate occurred before and during the conference about what longterm benefits might accrue from holding a PSi conference in Asia, and how Asian issues might shape future international academic discourse. By the end of the conference, it was evident that the lower case 'i' remained valid and necessary – it was far from clear whether a capital I was a desirable end goal.

The PSi conference website remains online (www.singaporepsi.org) while further regional conferences are planned. But perhaps this infrastructure for future activity would better serve imminent regional interests than overly generalised international concerns. There are many venues for debating whether American conference delegates should apologise for their country and president. There are fewer venues to deal critically with cultural ties between Asian nations and the regional pressures of globalisation.

Singapore is not an abstract meeting place of East and West, but is characterized by its own parochialisms and particularities, some of which are partially shared by its East and Southeast Asian neighbours. It is one thing to see Singaporean performance artists coping with state censorship in their work, quite another to observe the reinstatement of censorship on post-Reformasi Indonesian performers. The repudiation of totalizing perspectives purporting to explain, represent and appropriate local theories and practices remains one imperative. The need for a disciplinary structure to facilitate performing, stating and interrogating 'Asian values', intra-regional cultural exchange, and the invention of cultural identity, with due attention to ethnographic minutiae, is another.

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IIAS Newsletter #35