

Catastrophe Repeats...or Else?

Eco-cosmopolitanism and the Rippling Effect of Everyday Praxis

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From silence, two bodies rendered in black-and-white images slowly emerge. Serene music fades in. In near stillness, they slowly move, folding and curling themselves in different ways within a wooden box, separated by a board. They are restricted, blocked from contact, but their breathing and corporeal states resonate with each other in their respective isolation, in a strange quietude. The black-and-white dance images are interchanged with shots of nature in color — blue sky, green plants, birds, and insects. This is a short video shared on YouTube, created by Japanese improvisation dance and photography artists Chico Katsube and Shoko Kashima in Kagoshima in 2020 during the outbreak of Covid-19.¹ Poetically rendering their transformed lives, they were also documenting the diminishing human activity around them. “The sky is clear, the beauty of nature is more glittering than ever before,” they observe as they note changes in their external environment: “production line stopped, cars and airplanes decreased, PM 2.5 decreased dramatically,” their video description notes (C.I.co. 2020). Different from popular images lamenting

1. 住む 棲む 澄む 済む (*Sumu, sumu, sumu, sumu*; live, live, clear, complete) danced by Chico Katsube and Shoko Kashima, with music composed by Naomi Minomo (C.I.co. 2020).

the emptied cityscape or the angst of humans under lockdown, Katsube and Kashima mix purity, naivete, and irony in their vision of the current planetary ecology, appreciating the way the environment at large was getting a chance to breathe. “Human beings may need time to stick into the closet. Then, I may see the time when the soul of the earth regenerated,” they write (C.I.co. 2020).

I encountered this video when Katsube and Kashima shared it during a roundtable discussion on dance improvisation that I curated in Shanghai in October 2021.² I asked them, along with other senior dance improvisers in charge of the artist-led i-Dance Festival—an inter-Asian network formed through hubs in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea—how they coped with living and dancing during the pandemic.³ It turns out that many artists at the roundtable made projects engaging with nature and the relationship between humans and nature. Reflecting on the topic of climate change, I find that some of the most thought-provoking acts and works that I encountered over the past two years do not directly deal with the issue of climate change per se but rather share a nonanthropocentric sensibility and concern for ecological interrelationships. When human activities shifted due to the pandemic, the natural environment changed in response.

On the issue of climate change, direct measures to cut down emissions of carbon dioxide are of paramount importance. Performance may assist by advocating to reduce emissions, but how can it also tap into a different source of change, perhaps not as evident but profound in a different way: a shift of awareness from inside out? The discourses of the Anthropocene have become more complicated as they have tried to address the diverse rather than homogenous “humanity” that has come to dictate the future of the earth in recent times, enmeshed, as that discourse is, with slavery and settler colonial violence (Woynarski 2020:185–88). Proactive discourse concerning “eco-cosmopolitanism” has been developed to promote awareness and analysis of a heightened global interconnectedness reaching towards “the realm of nonhuman species” and “of connectedness with both animate and inanimate networks of influence and exchange” (Heise 2008:60–61). My perspective corresponds to such discourse, but here I want to offer thoughts distilled from what I observed in my distinct glocal context, coming from two points of entry:

Figure 1. (previous page) Tashi (Yang Yuguang) and the Snow Lion (Feng Li) in Ago by Stan Lai at Theatre Above, Shanghai, 9–22 December 2019. (Photo by Wang Kai)

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2. The roundtable discussion, titled “Restarting from the ‘Gap’: Improvisation, Networked Alliance, East Asia—Past and Future,” was part of the 4th Shanghai Improvisation Festival, initiated by Shanghai-based dancers Yu-Chien Cheng and Feixingjia, which also included workshops, jams, and performances. The festival has been held annually since 2017, except in 2020 due to the pandemic.
 3. i-Dance Festival was initiated in Hong Kong by a group of independent artists in 2004 but was dormant until 2009 when Y-Space, founded by Victor Ma and Mandy Yim, picked it up and has continued with the organization since then. The festival developed into a networked alliance hosted by dance artists based in Taiwan (since 2011), South Korea (since 2012), and Japan (since 2013) (see <https://www.i-dancehk.com>; <https://idancetaipei.tw>; <https://www.aiaekorea.com/>; and <http://i-dancejapan.net/>). The “i” marks the festival as initiated by and from the perspective of independent artists (rather than institutions) and also connotes other meanings: identity, individual, interact, international, improvisation, sharing the pronunciation of “love” (*ai*) in Mandarin, etc.

one during the pandemic and the other immediately preceding it — both straddling multiple and interconnected concerns. One regards performance and living praxis, which is rhizomatic, seeping into the everyday — anticipated by the Katsube and Kashima film. The other is representational as a concentrated, skillfully crafted theatrical work of art, happening in the realm of commercial theatre with high visibility.

During the roundtable discussion, we also saw many images of solo improvisations performed outside in nature. Another video that left a deep impression on me was shared by Hong Kong dance artists Victor Ma and Mandy Yim, featuring Ma improvising at the seaside of Nanjo, Okinawa, shot in 2019. Far from virtuosic technical demonstrations of dance that merely treat nature as a backdrop, Ma was immersed in a meditative state, moving in response to the atmosphere of the natural environment — the sound, the texture, the smell — as he seemed to breathe *with* nature. The video was part of the online screening of their project *Dancing All Around*, which features documentation of dances taking place beyond the theatre space. Besides dancing with nature, we saw dancers moving among dense and variegated cityscapes — shopping malls, factories, crammed streets, narrow lanes, bars, and apartment rooftops.⁴ Ma and Yim's projects embody the ongoing corporeal negotiations required of humans living in the complex conditions of Asian capitalist economic development, where versions of inherited ideas about humanity and nature being one and in harmony also persist.

This contradictory ethos is especially reflected through artists' actions. Moving beyond the physical theatre space enacted the will to push institutional boundaries and defy resource demands. During the pandemic, new layers of meaning emerged that added to the already intersectional politics of performance praxis. In the same roundtable, a direct consideration of climate change was reflected, if only briefly, in South Korean artist Solmoon Jinsoo Kim's outline of an eco-dance festival under planning. The festival was to be organized as a network of small groups (partly due to the unfeasibility of large crowd-gathering under the pandemic), with minimal use of electricity as part of a plan to promote sustainable living. Embodying the amalgamated interests of improvisation, dancing, living, and ecological consciousness, Solmoon's vision demonstrates a rhizomatic mode of connection and movement as methodology.

My second entry point is the play *Ago* (2019) written and directed by Stan Lai. I have discussed *Ago* in light of its fable-like storytelling in a contemporary ritualist framework manifested in Lai's unique theatre-in-the-surround staging, where his philosophical views on theatre and Life coalesce (Seetoo 2021). Implicated in the play are Lai's nonanthropocentric and eco-cosmopolitan worldviews. *Ago* features two Tibetan brothers endowed with supernatural powers. The elder brother Dorje can spontaneously sing about the mystical utopic place called Pure Land, while the younger brother Tashi can speak with animals. There are more than 20 animal characters in this play, to whose lifeworld Tashi connects. Tashi's interspecies interactions are often filled with humorous repartees, and even abstract concepts like "Time" and "Chance" become characters that join in their conversations. These scenes, inserted among the other main scenes featuring the pleasures and woes of the human characters, refract several meanings: a sort of mirror-reflection of the human world (with the various anthropomorphic characterizations of the animals from the bear and wolf in the Yunnan mountains, to the pigeon, stray cat, and the sewer rat couple in New York City), while suggesting a sense of the greater reality beyond the operations and worldviews of the dominant humanity. On the metaphysical level, the dialogue conveys observation of the patterns and workings of all matters happening on earth in historic recurrence as the action moves around the circular stage that surrounds the audience in the middle, also referred to as the "Lotus Pond."

4. A video of Victor Ma dancing in Nanjo, Okinawa, is available at <https://vimeo.com/367240685>. For more streams of relevant videos of *Dancing All Around* see https://vimeo.com/363528777?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=39044402. Documentation of Improvisation Land 1-27 by Y-Space also shared during the roundtable is available at <https://vimeo.com/620671200/daea248036>.

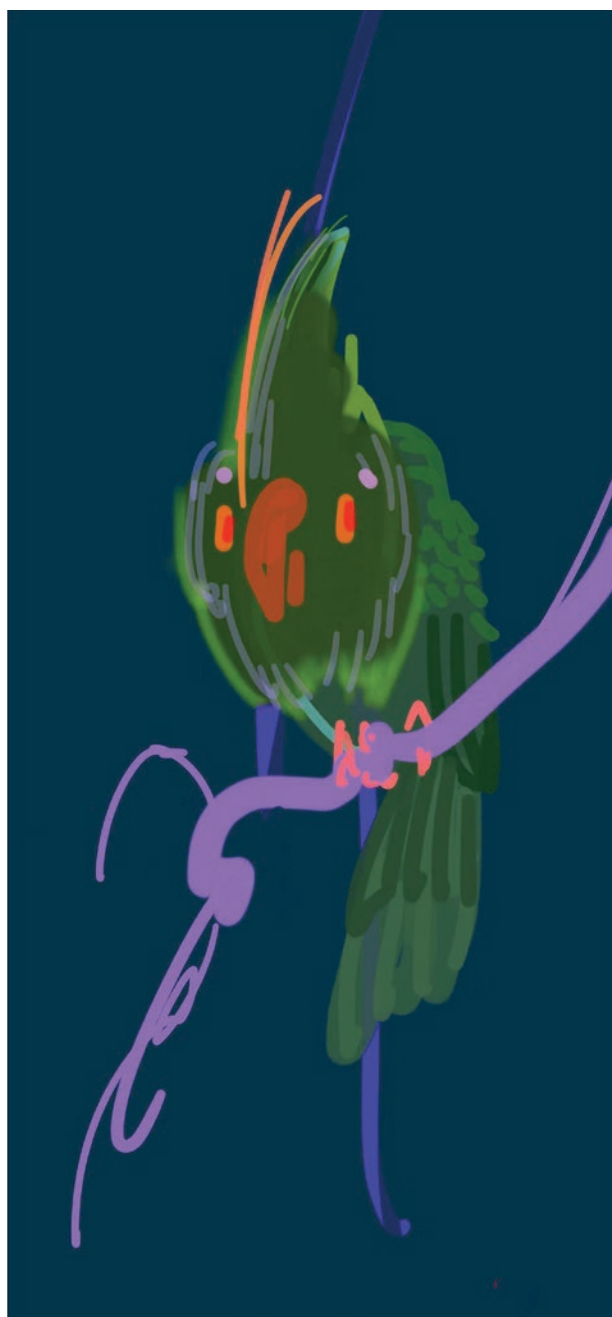


Figure 2. Cell phone drawing of a bird by Liu Yi, imagined from listening to the recording of bird sounds. Liu has been posting his cell phone drawings on his social media accounts since 2015. (Courtesy of Liu Yi)

Three deathly disasters occur in *Ago*: an earthquake in the mountains of Yunnan Province in China, the 9/11 attack in New York City, and a snow avalanche in the Himalayan Mountains in Sikkim. The main characters move from Yunnan to New York after the earthquake and then embark on a journey up to the Himalayas in search of the legendary Pure Land. After the snow avalanche kills most of the characters during their expedition, the two surviving characters go back to New York and continue with their lives. The setting of *Ago* spans 25 years, and within the run time of five hours the play progresses with subtle structural repetition punctuated by the mortal catastrophes that repeat on the same stage. The Chinese title of the play, *Ceng Jing Ru Sh*, literally means “as it used to be.” A longtime practitioner of Vajrayana Buddhism, Lai instills Buddhist views in his play, seeking to offer “compassion and luminosity” (Lai 2019). The lyrics in the song that Dorje sings at the end convey Lai’s wisdom: “In this grand dream, when do we wake? We dream here, then there. Where from, where to? Happiness and suffering are the same trickster, deceiving us into not waking up” (Lai 2021:470).

The pandemic broke out soon after the Shanghai premiere of *Ago* at the end of 2019, as if the deathly disasters in the play—the supposed illusion onstage—foreshadowed reality. In a way, the disasters referenced in the play hearken to the looming sense of crisis that characterizes our current era. The character Sage, a UFO cult believer, while spreading the idea that aliens will save the people on earth from apocalyptic destruction, cites climate change–induced disasters: “The ocean’s rising, Manhattan will soon be gone, earth is coming to a fucking end (and you’re still thinking about your payroll, your retirement, your pension!)” (Lai 2021:336). The disasters that happen in the

play—earthquake, terrorist attack, and snow avalanche—do not directly relate to climate change. Before the coming of the earthquake, Tsering the wolf tells Tashi to warn the humans to flee, but Tashi does not understand why Tsering is helping the humans who hunt them down. Tsering explains: “Harmony is the law of the universe. When there is no harmony, then the universe will create chaos in order to get back to harmony” (305). Snow Lion, a character based on the mythical sacred beast from Tibetan legends, also tells Tashi that with his given ability to speak with animals, he carries the

mission of “spreading our message of natural harmony to the world” (280). Tashi eventually denies his own ability to speak with animals, having endured the accumulated violence of scorn and disbelief laid on him by other human beings. The implication within the play is that disasters are symptomatic of greater eco-cosmopolitical imbalance. The last “disaster,” the snow avalanche that kills almost everyone in their doubtful search of the Pure Land, could be read as metaphoric of the tragic failure of humans to truly believe in and pursue the utopia they envision. Although here I highlight the catastrophes and a nonanthropocentric worldview, there is a multitude of life stories in *Ago*. If we follow the philosophical views that inform Lai, all that occurs on earth is entwined to form a much greater and more profound karmic process. Ultimately, the play shows the follies of humankind and questions our choices and the ways we conduct ourselves on planet earth.

As I was writing this piece in April 2022, Shanghai was undergoing an unprecedented lockdown to “battle against” a new wave of a Covid variant outbreak, while many other countries had decided to remove restrictions. For more than two years, we have all experienced the shifts of general life rhythms: stops and sporadic restart; sudden cancellation and forced plan changes; distancing and isolation—sometimes all at once; other times on different schedules depending on the way the virus wind blows. The disruption and breakdown of material and temporal flows have thrown into reflection the previous rhythm that has supported the internal logic of capitalist extraction, accumulation, and depletion that have led to the climate crises we are now facing. While many individuals have appreciated the revelations they have had while coping with this alternative rhythm, will these add up to a peripatetic turning point for the planet? Or, as history continues in its cyclical pattern and catastrophe repeats, will everything return to “as it used to be”?

Towards the end of the roundtable discussion, dance artist Ming-Shen Ku from Taiwan remarked: “The world may not be too much different with one less person dancing, but with one more dancer who has cultivated a body-mind balance and positivity, there could be some kind of rippling effect, quietly influencing their surroundings.” I thought there is luminosity, too, in Ku’s remark in recognizing the limitations, as well as the power, of performance. Performance may not always be able to directly intervene in systemic problems or create policy change. And yet, we can all be that one more person who extends care and a helping hand to our neighbors and communities; we can all be that one more person who is humble and respectful of all lives on this planet.

By May 2022 in Shanghai, local social media was ablaze with postings of disasters caused by the harsh measures of pandemic cutbacks and closures on a daily basis.⁵ In my own friend-circle newsfeed, I noticed two people who continued to post content on something other than the immediate situation of the local lockdowns. One is Beijing-based poet Ye Kuangzheng, who persists in posting news about the Ukrainian war. The other is disability visual artist Liu Yi based in Shanghai, who started a project calling for “‘recording bird sounds from the balcony’ during the pandemic” (“Yiqing zhong ‘yangtai lu niaoming’”) (Liu Yi 2022a). He first posted on 1 April 2022 (when Shanghai entered full lockdown): “There are fewer people, but there are more bird sounds, which are suddenly broken by the sirens of the ambulance. Why, on the empty street, do we need sirens?” On 3 April, he recorded bird sounds from his balcony and shared with his friends, in turn receiving many more friends sending recordings back to him. On 4 April he announced this project on social media and since then has

5. Shanghai was in full lockdown, to control the pandemic, from 1 April to 31 May 2022. A snippet of the lockdown situation in Shanghai can be observed in a video file by a netizen who compiled sounds that had been circulating on local social media and later put on YouTube. The video consists of sounds from a wide range of sources including from official news announcements, and numerous recordings of phone calls that Shanghai citizens made to personnel in charge of neighborhood affairs or pandemic control offices. See “Voice from Shanghai Lockdown” at https://youtu.be/38_thLXNH8 (Kevin in Shanghai 2022).

made daily updates, posting recordings of bird sounds from those who responded to his call and sent him files.⁶

A ripple effect is forming to quietly disrupt the mundanity of the everyday in this moment of multitudinous humanitarian and planetary crises. We are still documenting, maintaining our compassion, and seeking luminosity.

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6. Liu Yi’s project is now officially named *Niaoming diantai* (Birds’ Chorus Radio Station). It started from his post on Chinese social media (WeChat) in April 2022 during the lockdown in Shanghai and has evolved into a collaboration with more organizations as a formal public art project. By discovering and sharing the beauty that has always already been around us, the project also brought forth a sense of healing and emotional empathy for others enduring the pandemic. As of late May 2022, the project has received more than 900 recordings from Shanghai, other cities in China, and around the world. The project is ongoing and growing (Liu Yi 2022b; see also Liu Xiaolin 2022).