

## Ulasan / *Reviews*

### Eurasia: Second Asia-Europe Dance Forum Mapping Some Sites of Mis/Understanding

*Asia Europe Dance Forum, Berlin  
2004*

Since it was first organized in 2002, the Asia Europe Dance Forum (AEDF) has become a regular programme of the Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF). The original idea was to provide a meeting platform for young choreographers from Asia and Europe that alternately takes place in one member country of the two continents every year. For each year, ASEF would look for a partner organisation in member countries in either Europe or Asia countries to co-hold the event. In 2002, it was Singapore's Goethe-Institut; no partnership was secured; 2004 in Berlin with Hebbel am Ufer Theater; 2005 in Tokyo with Tokyo Performing Arts Market (TPAM) and Dance and Media; 2006 in Warsaw with Cinema Arts Foundation, On/Off Productions and Egurrola Dance Studio (forthcoming). Next year will be the turn of Beijing, partnering with the China Dance Association.<sup>1</sup>

I was a participant in the 2002 Forum together with four Indonesian dancers and some people from the dance scene in Jakarta. In 2004, I was asked to co-organise the Forum in Berlin, together with the main curator Betina Masuch from Hebbel am Ufer Theater ([www.hebbel-am-ufer.de](http://www.hebbel-am-ufer.de)), one of main performance spaces in Berlin.

Masuch proposed a theme, *Eurasia: Mis/Understanding*, and we invited 16 young contemporary dancers/choreographers and a dance-filmmaker from 15 countries to join the 8-day meeting. The curatorial framework of 'mis/understanding' had made the Forum not only a site of re/presentation, but most predictably, of confrontation. The complexities which arose stemmed

from the different cultural identities and languages, distinctively layered in contemporary dance terminologies and historiography of the two sides. This led the participants to first render before negotiating the theme 'mis/understanding' as an opportunity to dis/engage. This review outlines a mapping of some sites of 'mis/understanding' across interactions – performances, workshops and discussions-in-between.

### **Pre-Event: Programming**

Programming evolved around two main activities: workshops, performances and impromptu discussions initiated by the curators whenever necessary. Hebbel am Ufer also invited Constanze Klementz, a dance journalist from Berlin, as an observer. It was a much smaller group compared to the one in 2002, but the Forum was held for a longer period of time (21–28 November 2004). All the participants took part in the activities – participating or presenting workshops from morning till afternoon, engaged in discussions, and saw a 3-day performance of some participants. They also met during coffee breaks, dinners at the Theatre's Cafe on performance nights; and saw a performance outside the Forum, i.e., Ballet de L'Opera de Lyon which presented choreographies of Mathilde Monnier, William Forsythe and Russel Malliphant.

### **Performing Mis/Understanding**

The three performance nights expectedly reflected many differences, contrasting not only ideas generated onstage, but also contesting the on-going thinking that permeated each performance piece. In general, the European choreographers intimated their practice more into the idea of performances by stretching it beyond the conventional understanding of 'dance' or 'choreography'. Susanne Berggren (Sweden), and Eva Meyer-Keller (Germany), collaborated to create *Hymn*, a series of performances where different performers sang national anthems of the European countries by putting the wrong combination of lyrics to melodies. For example,

the lyrics of the French national anthem were sung to the melody of the German national anthem. *Hymn*, which was performed to bridge one performance to the next, clearly deconstructed the idea of nationalism but at the same time questioned the agenda of regionalism, i.e., European Union. The other question which crossed the minds of many Asian participants is: “where is the ‘*dance*’?”. This piece contests the ideas conceived in the only dance film presented, *Exodus: Women on the Run*, a collaboration between a Malaysian filmmaker Sherman Ong and Indonesian choreographer Chendra Effendy. The work can be read as a multilayered metaphor about identities at the convergence of intercultural, intergender relationships, embodied in a story of a classical Javanese female dancer whose life collides with the life of a Chinese shampoo girl who is from low-class society, an encounter bound by the two women’s fascination with dance. Without comprehending the politics of diasporic culture in Southeast Asia, this work could easily be misunderstood as merely exoticising Asia.

The three solos by female Asian choreographers contrasted the different training, background and thinking among the Asian performers. Long Yunna (China) performed *Free of Bounds*, a five-minute abstract dance, showing her body’s fluidity through phrases of movement exploration, roaming the stage in diagonal efficiency. Jin Young-Kil (Korea) performed another abstract dance where the movement vocabulary might be different in form but resembled the aesthetics of Yunna’s dance. However, Aida Redza (Malaysia) who was residing in Rotterdam, presented a piece derived from the shamanistic traditions of Malaysia. First, the audience was asked to watch the performance standing on the same stage level with her where she moved with a corner as her boundaries. Among her properties were a mortar which she used to grind red chilies and a simple stove where she grilled *belacan* (shrimp paste) filling the theatre space with a peculiar smell. This performance presented a notion about ‘myth’ which was discussed following the dance to which European participants reacted with mixed feelings.

### **Choreographing Mis/Understanding**

Framing the Forum around the concept ‘mis/understanding’ also highlighted how internationalism affects the dance scene through its global practices which have changed over

time, partly due to the internationalisation of culture itself. For European artists, internationalism is often transcribed into a strategic and/or strategised move across practices and spaces – be it towards the differentials of theatre system and/or other specifically curated events such as festivals or forums. While internationalism provokes a sort of new, unified identity particularly in organisations such as European Union, it also establishes local differences among countries as reflected in each country's cultural policy and dance politics.

Globalisation indeed quickens the economic process, including the flow of information but it does not guarantee that this information is evenly spread. In dance, this process helps to disseminate certain types of news as well as gather public opinion as shown in the case of the city of Frankfurt's decision to discontinue William Forsythe's Ballet of Frankfurt after twenty years of residency. It also takes more time for the dance world to hear from areas such as of Eastern Europe whose contemporary dance is located in a different political and historical context.

Artists including young choreographers constantly re/negotiate their practice by moving between what Stuart Hall points out as 'fluxes', trying to find a niche as a member of multiple systems. Many of the European participants are from this generation. Philipp Gehmacher (Austria) decided to move back to his home country after having spent a decade studying and working in the United Kingdom (UK), on the ground that the Anglo-Saxon dance politic and market do not accommodate the types of work he would like to create. A 'product' of the UK dance system himself who trained in Laban Centre, he found the current UK dance market limiting. From a much smaller Vienna, his 'new-old' home, Gehmacher can reach out as far as Berlin and other dance cities in Europe, engaging in various collaborative projects that he aspires to.

Eva Meyer-Keller (Germany) was moving towards visual-theatre-performance type of work, away from what she calls the 'beautiful dance'. In addition to her series of national anthems

performed on stage, Meyer-Keller invited all participants to her apartment in East Berlin, and provided them with recipes, cooking tools and ingredients of German Christmas cookies. She explained in her presentation later that she was currently drawn into movement and functionality which drove her away from exploring bodily movement as in 'beautiful dance' or making choreography in the way that is traditionally perceived.

Meanwhile, Xu Jie (China) who is based in Singapore came mainly to perform a group piece which engaged other people including the Hong Kong participant choreographer, Yuri Ng. Ng operates between Hong Kong and Canada; between commissions of classical ballet and contemporary forms. His dance piece, *Kilt Bill*, was actually a production of Ah Hock and Peng Yu, a Singapore-based dance company led by three other Forum's participants, namely Aaron Khek Ah Hock, Ix Wong Thien Pau, and Ebelle Chong.

Up to a certain extent, contemporary dance in both Europe and Asia seems to be evolving towards a more globalised context; ruled by the nature of transculturality and transnationality. Except for a few wealthy Asian countries or metropolis like Singapore, this practice is still not widely applied in a wider part of Asia where other the arts and culture have not been part of the overall development policies.

Both Asian and European participants were not well-informed about each other's practices. When it comes to gazing at each other – albeit vaguely, the initial days of the Forum revealed a predictable dynamic. From the perspectives of the young European participants, Asia seems to be a faraway land, a much more mediated experience. Few have visited the region mainly for holiday or due to interest resulting from some personal connection. Thus, most were clueless regarding the state or development of contemporary dance in the region.

The young Asians attending the Forum had mixed perceptions about Europe. Their views were often based on cultural stereotypes as a result of their Western oriented and stylized education,

and English language inproficiency or the 'postcolonial' baggage they carried. Interestingly, Europe is sometimes gazed with paradox: between fascination and suspicion. With the variety of identities of its participants, the works presented and the discourses that took place potentially challenged the notions of 'contemporary dance' as a 'critical practice'<sup>2</sup> and an 'art form'.

### **Dance Lexicon: Devising Mis/Understanding**

The Dance Lexicon workshop session was expected to facilitate a productive encounter and acts as a tool for the curators to address various aspects of language in contemporary dance. The dance lexicon simply consists of A–Z alphabet with carefully selected words listed for each alphabet associated with movement and dance.<sup>3</sup> For example, the alphabet B, consists of words '*ballet, body, bunraku, Bausch (Pina), beauty, building, ballroom dancing, breakdance, Bollywood, butoh, breathing*' and this rule applies for the rest of alphabets. Each participant was asked to pick 2–3 words from the list and build their workshop around them, be it a technique class, a presentation (video or others), a game, or anything creative.

I categorised the workshop sessions into several formats although some participants combined one with another. Everyone was asked to prepare the workshop beforehand but changes were still possible if deemed necessary. The 'mis/understanding' was conveyed mostly through Dance Lexicon workshop where concepts around contemporary dance such as notions on bodies and traditions were confronted.

#### **1. Technique classes – Bodily Identities**

Several participants from Asia gave technique classes of certain dance styles whilst interestingly, none of the Europeans did except a few such as Prue Lang who introduced the movement method used in her latest choreography (performed during the Forum). Long Yunna (China) and Jin-Young Kil (Korea) conducted a full technique class on modern

dance and yoga; and a traditional Korean dance respectively. Others like Aaron Khek Ah Hock and Ix Wong Thien Pau (Singapore) taught a dance technique inspired by a Chinese philosophy, combining it with discussion about their relationship both in/outside dance. They talked about their experiences being a long term gay couple in the city-state Singapore with its ambiguity dealing with the gender issue; challenges on managing their young dance company and insights on working as choreographers in Singapore. Ety Kajol from Indonesia also taught a certain Flores dance technique which was informed following her introductory presentation about her work. The mis/understanding is reflected through comments from some European participants questioning the seemingly fondness of their Asian counterparts for giving technique classes over discussing what they think as more pertinent issues such as choreography-making and methods. One participant from Europe expressed that he had had enough classes – both as a student and a working dancer – and wondered why the Asian participants seemed to be fascinated with technique. I noticed that English inproficiency is one of the main reasons why some Asian choreographers chose to frame their workshop around technique classes. Aside from this fact, it was also inevitable to acknowledge the different practices and methods of education regarding contemporary dance which contributed to the mis/understanding. Aaron Khek Ah Hock and Ix Wong Thien Pau, for instance, do not have this language barrier, but they still strongly felt the need to give the technique classes on Chinese dance. After having been confronted with different ways of thinking during discussion sessions, they admitted that *‘My very westernised upbringing would want to make Ix and I believe that I would have a better take to understand Europe with language proficiency and all my knowledge of the West. Ix and I were all wrong...’* (Reports Brochure, Eurasia: Mis/Understanding, Asia Europe Dance Forum 2004).

## 2. Presentation about Works

Some participants presented video documentations of their staged works or work-in-progress, images or words that inspired or influenced them. Ety Kajol (Indonesia) showed two tradition-inspired choreographies she did in two different contexts, rooted in her

Floresian traditions of Nusa Tenggara Timur island. Her classification of these works as 'contemporary' confused the European participants who said that without listening to Kajol's explanation, they would think that her works were 'some tribal dance', definitely not contemporary. Kajol's intimacy with her ethnicity was contrasted by Mikuni Yanaihara's (Japan) video based on the works of the cosmopolitan group she co-founded. The group actually attracts more non-contemporary dance audiences since it is a multimedia artist collective, working with video art, music and other crossovers. Gehmacher presented a choreography called Incubator, which was a close study on microscopic bodies (their moving spaces and timeframes), communication and gestures. Gehmacher's fascination with the body as *disiecta membra* (able to 'dismember' and dispersed for analysis) (Brandstetter: 2000: 22) was hardly fathomed by most Asian participants growing up in local traditions where the body is perceived as a 'whole'. The fact that the presentations were not always well translated certainly made the sessions less smooth. Beyond the English language lies the difficulties of explaining a certain context, be it social, political or cultural, which is specific to each presentation.

### 3. Game, Play, Mixed, Varied

Aida Redza (Malaysia), then studying in Rotterdam, opened her workshop with a 'water ritual' – a method she developed as a pre-performance self-preparation and some traditional games from her childhood. At least one participant from Europe resisted trying the 'water ritual' despite Redza's explanation that it has nothing to do with any religion. Mette Ingvarsten (Denmark) decided to change her planned workshop by presenting various games. In one of them, she asked each participant to list down her own dance lexicons according to the alphabetically, and visualise them with their bodies through certain associated acts performed in front of others. To her surprise, this supposedly 'easy' game was not easily followed by participants from China or Japan (the latter used her electronic dictionary to be able to take part). This session also informed Ingvarsten that her 'phonetic-based' letters game would not make sense if it is applied in Mandarin *hanzi* or Japanese *kanji* letters which is pictorial-based.



A set of these eclectic themes derived from the dance lexicon provided not only myriad topics to dis/agree with but also projected a wide spectrum of differences easily morphing into a mis/understanding. A significant one is when the ballet technique clearly inscribed in a workshop of modern dance steps taught by Yunna sent a significant shock to some European participants, prompting another impromptu discussion session. The Europeans were shocked at how a bodily/performance tradition (in the European context) such as ballet, with its long critique especially prompted by early dance modernism, could be embraced by, and could earn a different cultural translation in the Asian context. But as Bettina Masuch, the curator from Hebbel am Ufer, pointedly concluded, it was strange and yet amazing to see how participants, regardless of their backgrounds in technique and artistic preference, and their fondness or aversion towards ballet, are actually fluent in ‘speaking’ it.

These discussions informed participants about how the historiography of contemporary dance in Europe is thoroughly written, theorised and well disseminated in the region. Through its shared memories, schools, research institutions, it has built a long-standing hegemony. It now became such a solid ‘identity’, putting Hall’s early notion (2000: 17) ‘constructed within discourse, produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies.’

However, in most of Asia, contemporary dance is very much in the process of being written. It is still very much in the discourse, being produced in specific, ongoing historical and institutional sites, formulating Hall’s ‘specific enunciative strategies’. Hence, to understand Yunna’s technique class (an amalgam of ballet–modern–yoga), one has to read China’s cultural history and how modern and contemporary dance was a part of a much bigger political scene, at least during the pre and post Cultural Revolution and how that relates to China in the pre-modern era.

After a week, the landscape of ‘mis/understanding’ had to be more than the usual clichéd confrontations of ‘East vs. West’ or ‘*rasa* vs. rationalisation’. The creation of such a forum such as a site of confrontation as much as reconciliation never becomes as crucial as now. As Constanze Klementz commented, “Mis/Understandings may even be the only alternative, if we

do not agree with the latest political tendencies that the world is a world of dualities and if we instead want to practice art or whatever apart from good and evil, black and white, east and west” (Reports Brochure). The forum’s dynamics implied how mis/understanding could actually be an effective meeting point which leads into a certain level of understanding.

## NOTES

1. For latest update, click [www.asef.org](http://www.asef.org)
2. The term ‘contemporary dance is a critical practice’ is quoted from Susanne Berggren, a participant from Sweden who divides her time between Berlin and Stockholm. This context was particularly raised by her in one of the discussions bridging the workshop sessions which then I found very useful to carry on within the Forum.
3. See, the Forum programme book, published by Hebbel am Ufer, November 2004.

## REFERENCES

- Asia Europe Foundation. *A Report of Asia Europe Dance Forum, 9–11 January 2002*. Singapore: Asia Europe Foundation; Goethe Institute Singapore, 2002.
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Mapping Some Sites of Mis/Understanding



**Photo 1** Workshop of Eva Meyer-Keller (cooking the German Christmas cookies)



**Photo 2** Workshop of Aida Redza (the 'water ritual')