

Art Is Unspeakably Moving: A Q&A With Yao Chung-Han

txt : Xue Tan

When Yao Chung-Han's debut performance blew audiences away at the 2P Music Festival in Hangzhou back in 2007, he was the only Chinese artist experimenting with combining sound and light in performance. Though a few years have passed, Yao still continues to loyally and sincerely explore the possibilities between these two elements. His work no longer just compliments his performances, as he now develops interactive light installations on a wide variety of scales, creating fascinating audiovisual phenomena.

Yao Chung-Han is also the cofounder of Lacking Sound Festival, the most important sound and experimental art organization in Taiwan. He has dedicated himself to the development of Taiwan's sound art scene while continuing to exhibit and perform worldwide. We spoke to this emerging artist about his work and creative concepts.

How do you perceive sound and light as the two main elements in your work? Are you attempting to create your own individual artistic language?

Yao: My works are often very spatial, and there is a common characteristic of light and sound—they can fill up a space in a second and fade away in a blink. Their fullness and emptiness leaves me a margin to play with, [allowing me] to show my individuality and artistic language. I have a strong determination in terms of artistic language. I often inspect my work with this method: if my work can be interpreted in another art form, that means it is not yet well executed. I believe each medium has its own linguistics; it should not enable an interpretation or a shift to other mediums. For example, music. We can hardly explain the overwhelming feeling we have from vehement or heartbreaking music. I think that's why theater, dance, music and art exist in different forms. My art practice is pursuing a world that I am yearning for. It's hard to describe, and I love to share with others, so art became my means of expression.

How did light and sound become your artistic elements? Are there any artists or works that have influenced your work or your perception of the world?

My favorite performing arts group is a Japanese collective called Dumb Type. I especially like their performative work "OR." I am obsessed with their calm and precise processes of light, sound and body. It feels like it's grabbing my nerves. Besides, I like to see flashes and listen to thunder. These are natural audiovisual artworks, on a scale that no man can achieve.

I used to have doubts about my work with light, sound and space. I thought [the effect] would be murmuring, but when I had my exhibition at NTT ICC Tokyo, I found it quite amusing that a Japanese audience could read my work without any explanation or statement. I was thrilled to witness my work go beyond culture and language.

Your works have a strong relationship with space. Some of your installations require viewers to navigate within them. Do you think this kind of interactivity is necessary?

Interactive art was a huge thing ten years ago. People found it amazing that hand movements [could control] images. But in 2011, these techniques blend in to our daily lives. Interactive art has become reduced to user-friendly interfaces [as we've seen with the iPhone]. I like this situation. It gives us an opportunity to test and discover the essence of art. Interactivity in my works is intended to create a conversation with people. I often process it in a less obvious way. I don't want to emphasize the techniques.

What elements you might consider exploring in the future?

The body. Many people have suggested that my sound performances should merge with dance, but I feel a dancer's body is distant from my idea of a human body. Perhaps an athlete's body is closer to my ideology. It's full of instincts, direct, and close to the normal idea of body.

How important is technology in your art?

If technology is equal to skill, then it is my tool, not my artistic language. If technology is equal to our era, then my works are indeed embedded in the present. I have to define what is in our present, because we all are part of it.

As the founder of Lacking Sound Festival, which has become the most important sound art organization in Taiwan, what is your vision for the project? What kind of social conditions and resources are required for its development?

I hope the Lacking Sound Festival can keep moving forward. We started the project because we were not satisfied with the quality of the sound art scene in Taiwan. The amount of participating artists and audiences has continued to grow over these past four years. It is very touching indeed. The thing that makes LSF different from other big sound festivals is that it is more like a practice field with an experimental spirit. It's growing slowly and honestly, providing a chance for artists and the audience to discuss and share ideas in close [proximity].

LSF mainly depends on government funding at the moment, but I hope we can eventually make the project self-sustainable. That would be encouraging for the Taiwan culture and art scene, proving that the Taiwanese audience can support sound art as an industry. You might furrow your eyebrows at the word I am using, "industry," but if baseball players can be professional, why can't a sound artist support his or herself by making it a profession?

During my artist residency in Tokyo, I often [went to] local noise concerts. The tickets aren't cheap, but the shows are always full. I think to build a group with a stable audience can help support different types of music, culture and art.

Can you share your plans for any new projects or exhibitions?

I will collaborate with sound artist Yeh Ting Hao on a new piece. The initiative of our collaboration came from a common concern about body. It will turn out to be an interesting project, considering our different perspectives. Also I will work with the River Bed Theater next year. We will rethink aesthetics, time and space. I am quite excited about it. For my own creative practice, I have been feeling very sensitive to my own body after the military service. I will keep developing Heart Beats through diverse forms like performance and installation.