

Rikey Cheng, *Unspeakable Rainy Season, Imagining Asia in Water City - TFAM by Luo Jr-shin*
ARTCO monthly, Review, p107-109, n.246, Mars, 2013



Water City - TFAM by Luo Jr-shin

Unspeakable Rainy Season

**Imagining Asia in *Water City* - TFAM
by Luo Jr-shin**

Rikey Cheng

Water forms a perfect architecture. This is another metaphor to represent what happens in our bodies and minds, revealing inner circuits, vessels and organs. It's fleeing. It's an impulse to publicize intimacy.

- Corps Circuits by Olivier Joyard

In his article *Corps Circuits*, French critique Olivier Joyard analyzes several films directed by Tsai Ming-liang in details, including *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992), *Vive l'Amour* (1994), *The River* (1997) and *The Hole* (1998). He regards performers' bodies as objects to be gazed, vehicles of desire and a certain kind of "circuit". Viewers and creators watch through cameras or as spectators. They see intimate desires and existential circumstances inside those bodies, represented



Disorn Duangado | *River No Return* photo provided by Luo Jr-Shin

by overflows, such as rainwater, water in the toilet, sweat, leakage and cracked tubes. However, their bodies adapt, as "water protects them, encloses them, attacks them, applies materials on them, so they are as glorious as stars in floods." (1) No matter where this idea is inspired from, water in films by Tsai before the year 2000 previews the relationship between flood and a community after the millennium. We see a never-ending and recurring circuit. Overflows in fact describe what happen within ourselves, especially in rainy cities in Asia.

Rainy Season and Floating Cities

Air circulation above tropical ocean creates monsoon. Continuous rain creates floods on the land. Excessive liquids overflow from their respective channels, leading to disasters. Floods and leakages penetrate into seemingly safe spaces covered by buildings. The ultimate image of flood is so vivid and enormous that people always easily ignore the most obvious signs, such as recurring raindrops in the scenes, and embarrassingly intimate scenarios: liquids emerge from various tissues on human bodies and return to human bodies by eating,

watermarks that should not appear inside buildings, floors and walls that are wiped over and over again, furniture piled up as temporary monuments to avoid flood, and random stacks that will be forgotten in the next moment. Of course, we should not forget those attempts without reason, trying to guide and collect liquids to plastic containers in various colors. If we have to name such a "temporary status", those tubes are almost constructed as unique installations. In *Water City - TFAM*, artist Luo Jr-shin attempt to touch upon all these scenarios. Just like water in the scenes, viewers only see this site-specific installation (or temporary status) finished right in the museum. The audience couldn't see the huge and indescribable collective structure and process behind the scene until they read (meta)statements by the artist to fill the gap between the finished work and the original plan.

First of all, Luo utilizes objects readily available in TFAM, including containers for leakage, piled-up documents appliances that may be soaked in water, as well as temporary tubes and containers to collect liquids. Tsai's movies portray a collective story in Asia, in which urban residents attempt to get rid of floods but in vain. When we look at Luo's installations, the unspeakable sentiment is similar to ambiguous feelings pervasive in Tsai's films. By connecting flooding image/status to personal daily experiences, we are able to observe more than static moments. As critique Wu Jing-yi mentions, "Luo's works on 'personal daily experiences' and 'bodies' are so difficult to discuss, as they are difficult to describe in texts. This creates an awkward and ambiguous situation." On the other hand, when "almost everything now can be mass produced and mass communicated", physical senses, which are unlikely to be conceptualized in words, become the lucky few to avoid "being copied, consumed and commercialized."(2)

Between original statement and finished installation, we notice he is inspired by two widely different spatial experiences between Treasure Hill and TFAM. His installation, in combination of images and ready-made objects, during residency in **Treasure Hill** last year responds to unique local landscape, such as drizzles in springtime during residency, flooding experiences, as well as life-related themes, such as air, basin and space. The new installation, on the other hand, incorporates his visiting experience in TFAM. As Taipei is humid and rainy, buckets in various sizes, shapes and colors are often spread in this aging venue during rainy season for leakage, which becomes the most unpredictable crisis to artworks and TFAM. Besides presenting flooding and leakage issues, *Water City - TFAM* crosses over the boundary between collection and display, represents more than visible water circulation, and reflects more aesthetic intention and senses than originally planned.

Space, Memory and Body

In TFAM venue, we see broadleaf plants for indoor decoration, old file stacks and magazines, displaced monitors and signs, tables, chairs, old sofas and other ready-made products. Lou rearranges them into various combinations with his subjective perspective, regardless of types and functions. This temporary status is intertwined with his own flooding experiences in the past. He uses instincts to recompose this flooding impression in a short time. It starts with each object's original function, takes weight and size into consideration, to construct an installation with stability and visual composition. If you contemplate its aesthetic intention from a

practical viewpoint (such as how to overcome leakage issues in TFAM), you would completely miss its poetic structure and unspeakable **disposition**. The dehumidifier in operation is the key to circulation, absorbing water particles in the air to create a mini indoor flood or water plants. In the actual installation, dehumidifiers are key elements for viewers to understand this work. Transparent plastic tubes connect the ceiling, plants and the floor into a system, but flowing liquids in tubes need representation the least. This also shows the division between aesthetics itself and its methodology. If we install a real circulation just to capture a visible process, this installation will only lead to a safe reality, similar to rebuilding or recovering a site. Humid, suffocating, or submerged, these uncomfortable feelings are still ignored or rejected exceptions, but still pointing to a **reality** outside art.

In this indoor venue without any flooding traces, Luo embeds a dehumidifier between a vertically-placed flannel sofa and a stack of magazines. No matter it's contradictory to the original functions or not, **uselessness** transforms this process into an event driven by no objectives. In this experience, deviated design surpasses artificial categories. Common personal experiences (flooding or soaked in rain) are extracted from natural circumstances, just like blue screens, motor in operation, shrinking puddles, and decorative plants. While this work samples from real scenarios, it also becomes a medium to abide by another potential order, just as alchemy transcends routines by recomposing and misusing ready-mades. However, it is still a kind of creative arrangement, leading viewers **inside** itself to observe a world that happens somewhere **out** there, such as John Berger's view on objects and painting.(3)

From Spectator Back to Body

Humid, suffocating and uncomfortable experiences and feelings, recollected by Tsai's movies, are already deep-rooted in viewers' memories and embedded with other unique intimate experiences. In an evening with typhoon and leakage, or in an always humid indoor space, viewers and characters in the movies sweat or pee in the rain. We recall various inner circulations or flows in overflows. In this image similar to "real scenes", "the world asks us not to think about spectacles, but explore dis-position".(4) Tsai doesn't make us uncomfortable, but senses connected by these arrangements, in which our physical accumulations are embodied in fragmented memories and even larger conscious structure. Tsai's family heritage in Southeast Asia is another cross-cultural reference. Although movies are produced in Taipei, similar scenarios are available in other Asian countries. Even if races are different and bodies are hidden, memories stay true across cultures and languages.

Stacking is the most important reference when watching Luo's site-specific installation in TFAM. Physical labor, to both the artist and citizens in Taipei, is not just a common cultural background, but also a catalyst to transcending aesthetic experiences, even though these responses to leakage happen in life mostly without notice.

What is art? What is routine? If people can recreate spaces in the face of disasters, why do we have to evaluate aesthetic values on a readable level? The artist raises a question in the end: How do objects in daily life migrate from routines into creative works? Maybe this piece of work intentionally hides those Asian bodies that

appear in movies, and also their aspirations to pass through predicaments. In the work *River No Return*, When Thai artist Disorn Duangdao uses flood water in Northern Thailand in 2011 to write down the invisible "River No Return" on rice paper, bodies and collective flood memory traces have transcended individual rainy season experiences into a common but different feeling in Asia. (5) After artists complete their little world, these memories will stay inside us forever like water.

1. Olivier Joyard, *Corps Circuits*, Chinese translation by Lin Zhi-ming is published in *Tsai Ming-liang*, Yuan-Liou Publishing, 2001
2. Wu Jing-yi, *The Shape of A Pocket* (www.luojrshin.com/files/luoreviewwu.pdf)
3. John Berger, *The Sense of Sight*, Chinese translation by Rye Field Publications, 2010. He mentions that "composition refers to placing shapes in a surrounded independent space, and also arranging for an interior." ... "Painting is bringing things inside ... paradoxically, it invites viewers into its room and observe the world outside." He reminds readers not to be limited by superficial differences among sculpture, painting and frames, shifting the focus to the aesthetic effects from interior to exterior.
4. Jean-Pierre Rehm quotes French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in *Tsai Ming-liang*, mentioning "it's better to explore (spatial arrangement, touch, connection and route) in dis-position."
5. Disorn Duangdao, *River No Return*, 2011, in the BACC project Temporary Storage#1 curated by Chitti Kasemkitvatana. More information on 2011 Thailand flood: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Thailand_floods

Rikey Cheng is former editor-in-chief in Chinese for Taiwan Digital Art and Information Center. He has been publishing art critiques since 2007 in print media. He is currently editor-in-chief for online journal No Man's Land and correspondent for Artco magazine and Performance Art Critique website, as well as passionate about backpacking in Southeast Asia in recent years.