

The Model and Its Realities

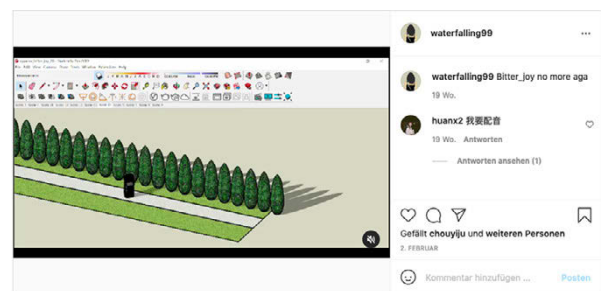
Yi-Ju Chou on her
work as scenographer
and experiments
with SketchUp

Interview: Frederike Maas

Artworks: Yi-Ju Chou, Ying-Chu Wu

FM: What you are describing sounds like in the stage design approach you were taught in your BA, you're mainly using the model to develop your ideas and see how they visually work out. So the model has a creative function within your working process as a stage designer, it's less about creating just a finished version of what you want to build eventually.

YJC: From the observation of my colleagues, especially people who study in their BA at ZHdK, I have the feeling that when they build models it's more about the material they are using, they will try to feel the materials and see how they interact. It's more on an experimental dimension. My training in the BA in Taiwan was a lot about the exact scale of things – for example the reason why we don't use fabric for the curtain in the model is that the fabric will have a different scale of knitting in the model than in real life – this will change certain things. So in my BA it was more about the exactment and here in Zurich it's more about experimenting with the materials and see how they work on the stage. And for me changing how I work with the models really also effects the design. I've actually started to use SketchUp right after my BA, it's an interior design software, where you can build up models with this computer program. In the beginning I used it more and more often because I thought this way



Instagram animation by Ying-Chu Wu



Stage Design of Delay by Yi-Ju Chou. Delay was Yi-Ju's final project for her MA degree in ›Bühnenbild‹ which she realised in a collective working mode with Timo Raddatz.

it's easier and faster to build the model. But eventually it also changed my mode of working in stage design because the software is not thinking in a human way – it might do some weird stuff that in real life I wouldn't have been able to come up with. So this interaction between me and the model really also effects my approach to stage design – or now I actually prefer to call it ›scenography‹ because what I do is less about design but more about the coincidence ...

FM: That's interesting because I've actually been wondering whether today it's still a thing to build material models now that we can simulate them with computer software. So when you use SketchUp now, is it still necessary to present material models to the team you're working with on a production?

YJC: It normally depends on the director – I mean in the sense that we are talking about a conventional and hierarchical structure of the theatre. So if I have the position of scenography, the director mostly wants to have something in real life, so they can really watch it with their eyes. I've made this one experience when working in this system of director/scenography that in the beginning I was trying to build the model with the SketchUp software but at some point the director was telling me: ›I know it takes time and you don't like to do it, but can you do a model for me because I really need to see it in real life‹ ... there you can

really see how things move and touch them. So for the communication it's still something necessary because computer software is the other dimension and it's hard for others to grab the real feeling of the space.

FM: I get that, it's like less haptic in a way. But that sounds like in the case you've described that you really only built the material model for the director. For your own process it was not as important ...

YJC: But I think that's also owing to the designing style that I am into. I've also been inspired by the 3D SketchUp software because everything makes sense there. If I build something in the real life, some scales will not be exact. For me, models are about scale. And the scale works really differently on computer software than with material models. For example, if we want to build a really thin door, say 150 mm. And normally the scale in which we choose to build the model for theatre is 1:50, which means the 15 mm will be 0.3 mm. So the door model we build will be really thin and for this kind of thickness it will be really hard to find the fitting material. For example, if you just use a thin piece of paper, it will be too easy to bend. And it's also about efficiency: The fact that building material models and finding the right materials for them just takes a lot of time – that will cut me down from my process.

But if we look at this video and we put it in the real scale way – that would create a surreal effect of those two realities interacting with each other.

FM: Surreal seems to be a good word to describe the effect the artwork has: You have this car which is standing up and moving in this really interesting way ... As if you asked: If a car was to walk, what would it look like? And I mean you can imagine the solution in your head, but it would be hard to communicate that idea to somebody else. So the digital really enables us to visually share these surreal, dreamlike scenarios we come up with.

YJC: That's true. Why we like to work with SketchUp is really for this reason. It's slightly stupid as well, you know, SketchUp is not made for animation. So, you're also working with those technical limits, and make those become other possibilities then. So, with SketchUp we don't want to build something which is similar to reality. We use the limits from the software itself as tools to create other languages for visual approaches. And what is interesting about that is also that you can still see the process in the work. For example, I can see my friend probably moved the car from here to there to there ... so the viewer is really able to see how it moves. For me it is really about destroying the illusion of the process and just making it an item.

FM: Yes, that's right. It definitely doesn't give you the illusion of a walking car but the simulation character is really visible at every point and this seems to be an integral part of the aesthetic you create with SketchUp. You don't get the illusion, you stay with the simulation.

YJC: And I think why her work is interesting is also because of the sound. I mean why would the car have that sound and why does it come from movement? I think nowadays we are already influenced by this internet medium with its millions of possibilities of how things could work. And for example, those sounds interact in a playback way, it's obviously not from the object there. It's a made sound and not like it is supposed to be.

FM: Here again it seems like this anti-illusionist aspect is important. I mean it's clear that the sound does not come from the car, but that it's a simulation. And you really work with this approach in which it's evident that what you create is not reality.

YJC: Yes, I feel like that is at least my interpretation of her work.

FM: What I really find intriguing is that the work by your friend seems to be looking for ways not to explore reality but the medium itself. But to me it seems that one might still ask the question how this does eventually relate back to the reality we live in.

YJC: I think it's about this shift between the medium and

reality. There is a term that I really like to define this in-between feeling of materials working with each other: *Infra-
mince*. It's from Duchamp, he describes this feeling from when we smoke and we still have the taste of the smoke in our mouth, really this in-between thing ... those in-between things are quite interesting. I like this idea of slightly shifting from reality through a medium which makes it like out of our conscious but it is somehow still having the structure there. Yes, I think this little space in-between is why an audience gets interested.

FM: That's maybe also what we said before is its surreal effect ...

YJC: Yeah. What's also important about SketchUp for me is the way I relate to the medium as a creator: How do I feel when not using it just as a tool but really using the human perspective, how do I feel about what I'm doing now, and it will just somehow create another context ... if I jump a bit outside I can figure out there are more perspectives than my own. If I stay back I can really discover what's the core of the medium.

FM: I mean this again is something you've already mentioned when talking about your scenography, that SketchUp enables you to create ideas that you would not have come up with originally ... so it's really about this engagement between you and the digital where things can evolve that are not just part of your consciousness as an individual artist but they emerge only in the interaction with the medium. And we've talked about this in the beginning as well in regard to the material models: Their creative function helping you to develop your ideas.

YJC: Yes, I think the work with SketchUp is really about involving the process and letting go a bit of what I want to do and instead see how it develops on its own.

This conversation took place on June 13, 2021 and has been edited for the present publication. The text is intended to echo the sound of the spoken word.

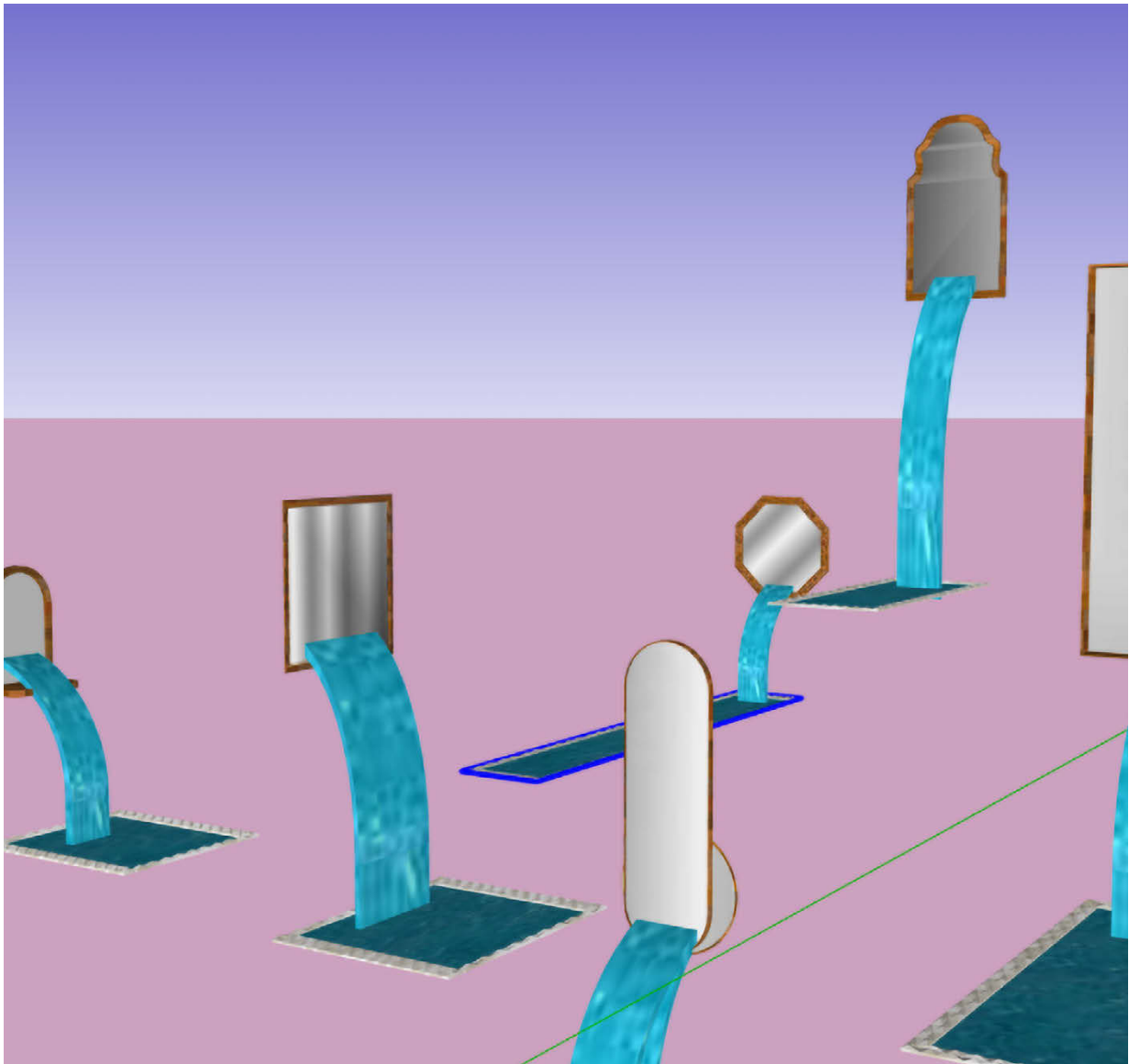


Image made with SketchUp by Yi-Ju Chou

Yi-Ju Chou has graduated from ZHdK with an MA degree in Bühnenbild. She also works as a performer and visual artist. In her work, she explores the limits of different media and makes them interact in order to re-create experiences of a multi-mediated reality.

Frederike Maas currently studies MA History and Philosophy of Science at ETH Zürich. Previously, she lived in Berlin, where she was involved in various artistic projects and completed her BA in Art History and Political Science at Freie Universität.