The Model and Its Reali- ties

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

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Artworks: Yi-Ju Chou, Ying-Chu Wu

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Instagram animation by Ying-Chu Wu

Frederike Maas: Nice to be here with you today, Yi-Ju – I'd like to start our conversation with some more conventional aspects of the model, relying on your experience in stage design in order to understand what can maybe be called the pragmatic side the model takes within a theatre production process. For instance: At what stage do you build a model and what role does it take within that process?

Yi-Ju Chou: In the traditional set or stage design educational structure – at least this is how I was educated doing my BA in Taiwan, which is very close to the US-American system – we try to already involve the model from the beginning when we do visual research which means that we will find some atmospheric images that we think are fitting the script and then we will try to turn the thought into a 3-dimension. Normally 3D is hard to sketch, I mean we are also taught to sketch but it's easier to communicate with yourself when you see: ›Ok this is the stage, there is a pillar here, so visually it looks like this‹. So normally, there is a few steps: First we have a ›rough model‹ with light materials that are easy to cut, glue etc. – this is less about the material but more about the structure what the space should look like. And then we will have a second version of the model which is probably involving the colour or the texture but it's still rough and then, after several versions in the end it will be the finished model which represents the texture and the colour we want to approach from the model. So there we will use similar materials, for example for the curtain we will use a napkin, we will really try to imitate what we want to use on the real stage.

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: I mean it is also used to communicate with a director: I feel like for humans it's hard to imagine a space in a 2D medium, so the 3D model is normally also what the director will ask for so they're able to imagine how things move and what their scale on stage will be. And it's easier to communicate with the models because you can say: ›There will be a rooftop and it is this high‹. Also what I've learned from my training is that it is really important to have the human scale inside the model so the size is more precise. With them it's really easier to imagine what the scale will look like in real life.

FM: Ok, so you're saying that the model has two functions: One is more for yourself – the various versions of rough models with which you elaborate your idea – and the other one is more a communicative function to help you present your idea to, say, a director in order to work out with the team if that's what they want.

YJC: Yeah yeah.

FM: And you've said that this is the way you were trained in Taiwan which is similar to the US. Is the way you incorporate the model in the production process different in Zurich?

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.
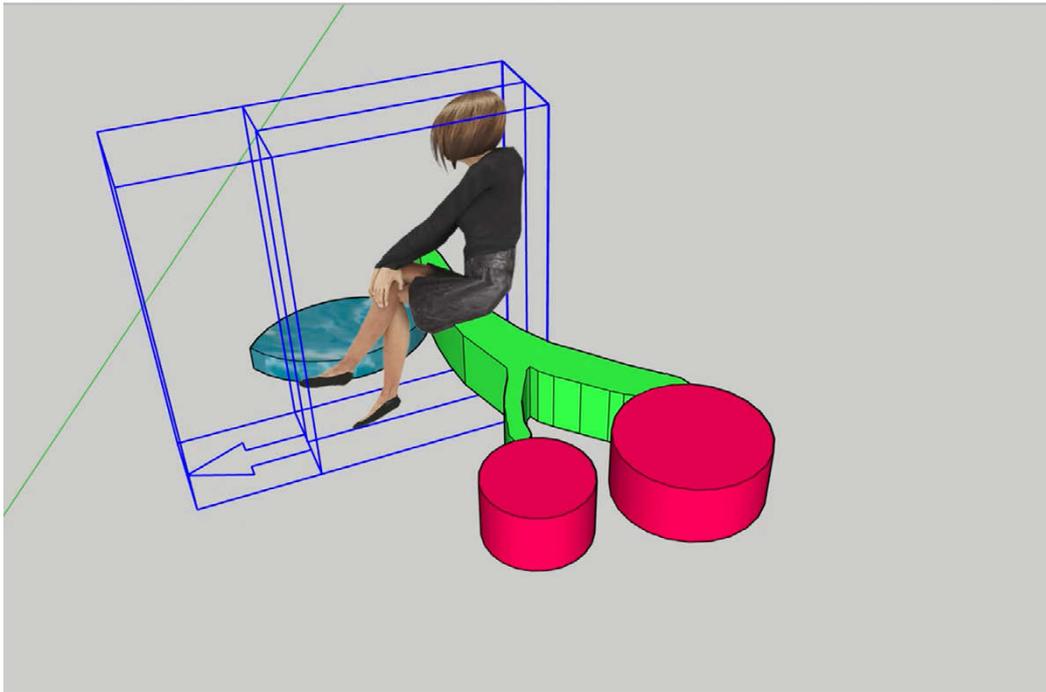
Working Sample of SktechUp by Yi-Ju Chou
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKxhZfR5LME

FM: So, it's an economic question as well. But also, you're saying that your stage designs are inspired by the model building process you do with SketchUp. I get that. For example, in your production *Delay* you really play with this idea of two-dimensionality translated into 3D space.

  YJC: Yeah, it's kind of funny. In the beginning I was using SketchUp to build models because it is easy to use – but also for the software you need to learn certain techniques to build the model that you want. So this kind of ›style‹ – but I'm not sure it's style really – of the stage I want to build, it comes from this poor knowledge of using the software. So I found there is an interesting connection: People can see how something has been built up from 2D to 3D.

FM: Alright, so the software is not only an instrument you use to build something in reality, but it also inspires the reality you build.

  YJC: Yes.

FM: We've talked about the model within a theatre production process. Now I would also like to talk with you about some works where the model itself becomes the art. You've sent me some works by a contemporary artist, a friend of yours. She also uses SketchUp to build models which she shows on her instagram.

  YJC: Yes, what she does would be hard to do with real life models. I think that her work is really working with the things available on SketchUp. What makes the software interesting is that they have a subtool box, it's like a 3D warehouse, you can download a lot of models built by other people. And from those existing models you can easily realise something which would take a week to build up and try out… So in this piece of work I think that the tree is taken from the warehouse, where they have different kinds of shapes of trees that can be used in an architecture or interior design context. And it's important to see that SketchUp is really made for interior design, not for animations. So, it's also about the limit of what interior design actually means. Also, the way things are reduced, like the shape of the tree, makes SketchUp interesting in the visual art direction. So, I mean: Trees are normally not able to line up in this very exact pattern and shape …

FM: Yes, also the shadow is more than perfect. And to me this seems to be what makes the artwork interesting. This perfection which is maybe also hyper-real in a way: It's more than real, something you couldn't achieve in reality, only in the simulation.

  YJC: Yes, also this outline of the objects in the program – you see, as humans in our ›reality‹ we don't have any outlines but in the model there is always an outline of everything, so those things are only existing in the digital way.

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: Inframince. 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.
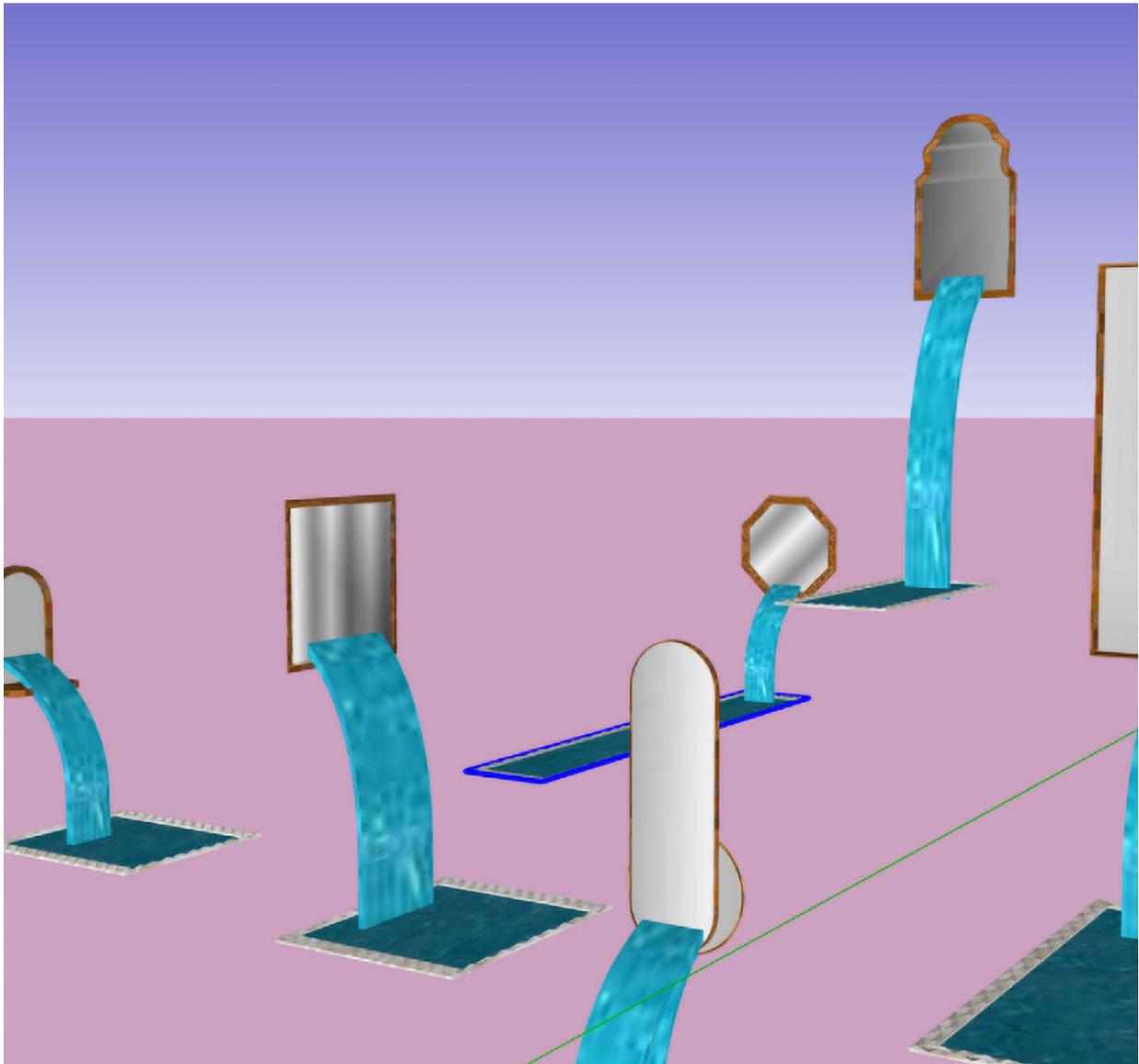
Image made with SketchUp by Yi-Ju Chou

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. Peviously, 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.