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POSTSCRIPT

Shame and Power.

A Critical Conversation on the Postdramatic Condition

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TUCHMANN: We are meeting today online, roughly two and a half years after your residence at the Dramaturgy Faculty at Beijing's Central Academy of Drama. I am delighted that you could make time for the conversation we are about to have, which will provide an opportunity for you to articulate changes and shifts in your aesthetics that might have occurred since our encounter in Beijing. In addition, I want to use the conversation to let you reflect on some assumptions of mine that are underlying the publication project. These assumptions are mainly connected to—what I consider—the commonality of your aesthetics and to the notion of dramaturgy. I want to start with my understanding of what your different artistic approaches have in common.

The most significant commonality in your approaches towards making theatre is that your theatres claim a specific relationship with events in the real world. Your works want the audience to see and understand that reality is never something natural, never something given, but rather something that is made up, something that has grown historically. The remarkable thing now is that your approaches don't stop at this point. All of your theatre is doing much more than "just" depicting reality as a construction, because you are all paying nuanced attention to the life of individuals and to the rich cosmos of detail. Your theatrical performances thus have developed dramaturgies that enable an audience to constantly swing back and forth between historical and individual perspectives, between the demystification of history and the poetic realness of the individual.

I would be happy to open this conversation by having you all comment on this understanding of mine.

ZHAO: I like what you said about the poetic realness of individuals. I think this is somehow quite connected to my work in recent years. In China, people always say I would be anti-something, I oppose something, or I would be very critical. I am always driven by the effort to overcome these attitudes. A crucial part of my work with *Grass Stage* consists in seeking future possibilities, but this is no easy thing. Life is harsh for many people. For my work on *World Factory*, I

collaborated with migrant workers who work in factories in Shenzhen; most of them were never exposed to the world of the theatre. When the production is done, it seems like that all that we talked about in the theatre is also over. Their life continues in factories without much change. How to deal with this? This is the question that keeps me occupied. Professionals often say, okay, you did what you did, you made your theatre piece, and raised the question. That's it. But for my work in the past 15 or 16 years with *Grass Stage*, it all comes down to the issue of how to continue with its collaborators and members; what could we bring to them? In *Grass Stage*, we are not connected to each other like on most commercial productions. Actors are not material for the director. We treat each other as equal partners. Somehow in the past few years, I started to think that maybe what *Grass Stage* could bring to its collaborators and members is to show them the possibility of being brave. We cannot change anything with the kind of theatre we are doing. By working with us, our members don't really earn money or get famous, or achieve a professional career. After it is all over, they simply return to the factory or wherever they were before. So, maybe through their experiences with *Grass Stage*, like touring, meeting people in other cities, or even overseas, those individuals would find ways to be braver. Hopefully, they become more experienced in confronting the harshness of reality.

WEN: I understand what Zhao Chuan means. I think for us, for the *Living Dance Studio*, it is quite a similar situation. A lot of our members, like Li Xinmin or Zou Xueping, are confronted with the exact issue of keeping on after the performance, because the impact that our work can make on society is very small, and so are their prospects within the performing arts world.

LEE: Zhao Chuan, I remember you once said that there is always a discussion after presenting your work and that this discussion is often stronger than the performance. Do you think of that discussion as a part of your theatre, or do you consider it instead as a part of life, as something connected to the world outside of theatre? How do you define the relationship between theatre and the discussion that follows the performance?

ZHAO: Yes, right. From the beginning of *Grass Stage*, we were always doing this kind of talk after the show. After quite a while, I realized that this had become a tradition for us. Our audience even started to expect this post-show discussion. So, over time, these post-show discussions became a part of our theatre. In the beginning, I did not plan for this kind of development, but I simply recognized that this practice was something important to the theatre we're doing. Nowadays, I do regard it as a part of my theatre. I have a Chinese term for it—*yanhou juchang*—which literally translates as “theatre after the performance”. This *yanhou juchang* has become an essential feature of this theatre we are making. Theatre and real life meet here and respond to each other.

NIKITIN: I would like to take up what Zhao Chuan said before about the question of how to be brave. If I understood you correctly, you have connected it to your project *World Factory* and how far this project can help the performers to become bold, braver in society. I think it's pretty interesting to use the word "brave" in this context. I relate to it very much because I believe what Kai called "the poetic realness of the individual" could be translated into the word "bravery." It has something to do with an individual who denies the prevailing collective reality. This denial could be described as a poetic act: you bring something into existence, of which you don't yet know what it might lead to afterward. That needs a certain bravery, and it also means being, for a moment, less ashamed. It's very much about shame, and it's interesting that this, what one calls postdramatic in the sense of a specific dramaturgical technology, could also be understood as an attempt to deconstruct the construction of shame. Shame is a form of collective violence that designates to the individual where it belongs, who it is, what it is supposed to do and what it has to be, and therefore what it has to represent every day to keep reality stable. The artistic practice of deconstruction, as I understand it, is not just an intellectual game of talking in a sophisticated way about reality. Instead, I realized that I have possibilities for action only by deconstructing reality, and these possibilities are grounded in a confrontation with shame. To confront shame needs a lot of bravery because stepping out of the prevailing concept of reality is always a risk. I think this is why the whole idea of postdramatic dramaturgy is related to technologies of becoming very personal on stage. When you, Zhao Chuan, talked about the members of *Grass Stage* and how they can become braver, it also means how to be very individual.

ZHAO: Yeah, thanks for expanding this rough idea I just formulated. I like the word that you mentioned: "shame." The mainstream culture we live in, is permanently making you feel ashamed. For example, during an official presentation, all the people you see on the stage or television are beautiful—and they speak Mandarin in a certain trained way. Most Chinese, we are not able to speak this kind of Mandarin; we immediately feel ashamed once confronted with such official presentations. Now, "being shamed" has also become a strategy of consumerism to target the middle class and produce their desires of being wealthy and healthy. So eventually, a lot of people feel ashamed about their bodies, appearance, and income. When we are making theatre, we are constantly dealing with this issue of shame. One way to deal with it is to encourage people to perform in front of others with their real appearance, their own story and creativity. Standing on the stage with dignity is very powerful. Another way to deal with this issue is being a part of a collectivity. Especially for the migrant workers I worked with for the past several years. It is interesting to see them becoming a part of the theatre collective of *Grass Stage*. The ideal of collectivity that is promoted by our state is just fake. It's all about obeying a given authority. Some of the workers are not well edu-

cated. Mostly, their life is very narrow without many choices. Through theatre activities, they learn to take notes, deal with people other than themselves, socialize, or confront issues together. It's very real for us to make theatre.

NIKITIN: I guess that a collective that has no space for the individual will always be this fake collective that you talk about, because it cannot avoid becoming an oppressive system in which the individual cannot think of itself other than being a part of this collective. Such a collective is a political force. It's also a legal force. To step out of it for a moment, and to dare to be individual for a moment, is maybe only possible in the realm of the arts or in the realm of activism. If you're a factory worker, you're so designated, told who you are, where you are, and how you have to behave that you don't even have the idea of emancipation. That's exactly where your theatre, Zhao Chuan, comes into play, by suddenly confronting workers with performance and the possibility of having access to a different kind of identity. This is quite a Brechtian approach.

ZHAO: Theatre as we practice it is a collective work. It happens collective efforts. But when our members come to the workshop, they give their own stories. It all starts with a collection of individual stories, but in the end we have something that we all have in common: our production. It's our stories, so people don't feel isolated anymore. The workers gain their strength when they feel that there are many of them. They experience being allowed to share, being able to communicate. They are not beaten up for being individual. In the reality of the world factory situation, they are powerless and have no bargaining rights. There are just big companies and big managements. Not seeing one's own experience as a lonely personal one but looking at it from the perspective of "many" will make people stronger.

NIKITIN: You are right. Individuality alone cannot be the starting point for a political change. If you're alone, then you're powerless. But you also stay alone if you don't start to talk about yourself. I think it is a question of how to use the terms "individual" and "collective" because these terms are very close to each other. I think that being individual has a lot to do with having dignity. It doesn't mean being alone.

TUCHMANN: I want to try to pause the conversation between Boris and Zhao Chuan here, because I want to invite Kyung-Sung and Wen Hui into the discourse. I mean, there has been a lot of talk about the role of the individual and how to empower the individual. Are there any thoughts that you want to share on that?

WEN: I have a question for Zhao Chuan because I share a similar work environment. I often have similar things to struggle with. I very much liked your *World Factory*, but I want to know if you are still in contact with these workers.

ZHAO: I remember that when you came to the show in 2014, we just started working on the history of industrial mass production and the current situation of labor. We always work very slowly, and we had just started trying to unpack this issue with the production of *World Factory* then. Under the same title, we did many different productions until 2017. We traveled with those productions. But also from 2015 onwards, we started to collaborate intensively with migrant workers, most of them from Foxconn. Between 2015 and 2018, we often went to Shenzhen every month to meet the workers. We had a small team of four people, Wu Meng, Wu Jiamin, Gao Zipeng, and I, who continuously worked on this project. Shenzhen is quite far away from Shanghai, so we usually spent five to eight days there per month and workshopped with the workers. The workshop participants continuously changed over time, but there were also some of them who stayed there throughout. They started their own theatre group called the North Gate Workers Theatre Group. They produce their own work, and they even received an award from a festival in Shenzhen. This was discontinued in early 2019 because the NGOs that backed this work were forced to disappear by the authorities. Nowadays, we still try to keep in loose contact with these workers. At the peak time, we were working in four different locations with the workers. Now, Wu Jiamin still frequently goes to the only NGO left to work with them.

WEN: I generally don't define my work. I am afraid of being bound by definitions. Regarding this flow of history that Kai has talked about in his introduction, I believe everyone looks at history from their own place and time. Of course, history is life. I always feel that history is like a building that you are in, and then suddenly somebody comes and knocks at the door. This person who knocks then becomes the key to the history of the person inside the building. Kai, I don't know if you remember: When we were in the early stages of rehearsing *Red* in Caochangdi, there was this day on which we did an improvisation, and suddenly you started reading *Capital* by Marx from the auditorium. And at that moment, I suddenly realized that everyone's relationship with history is different. I thought, look what Kai is doing there, and I realized that you also have a connection with the history of Marxism. I think my practice is to base the work on the personal situation, be it that of the dancers, or in your case, that of a dramaturg.

TUCHMANN: I immediately think of linking what you just said to the conversation that Boris and Zhao Chuan had about being brave about overcoming shame. Because I remember how much work on shame there was while doing these

improvisations in *Red*, how many times the performers on the stage felt ashamed—for so many different reasons.

NIKITIN: It is also a question about artistic practice, in general. I remember, for example, when Kyung-Sung talked in Shanghai about his piece in the public space called *Let Us Move Your Sofa*. This work is a poetic practice that also relates to the question of shame, because to do funny and absurd things in public space means to break—or at least to shift—the norms of public expectations imposed on our bodies. There's an empowering aspect to it. Maybe bravery is a too big word for that, but in the end, it is about doing something, presenting it to an audience—and people will judge it. There's a moment in which you have to overcome your shame and embarrassment, and you have to activate a little bit of bravery. I don't know if you would agree.

LEE: Thank you for describing the work. It happened like 11 years ago. Its main intention was to create a subjective, individual experience in the public space of Gwanghwamun Square, because at that time the mayor wished to redesign that square into a very new, very fancy place in the middle of the city. This was utterly manipulating the experience of subjectivity in the city. I think this is pretty much related to the issue of shame because many people felt alienated in this new public space, which looked so neat and fancy.

To create a personal experience in this public space became the main artistic aim at that time. There is one loosely related thing that I want to talk about, rooted in my latest experience. I recently made the work *Brothers* with a North Korean refugee and a South Korean actor, who perform on the stage together. They were both born in the same year, in 1983, but their childhoods were totally different. I was trying to intertwine their personal experiences of the times and spaces they went through. But there was some conflict with the South Korean actor during the process because he was not willing to share his personal view or personal memories to the same extent as the North Korean refugee already had. I had been working with this actor for a long time. He became sick of being personal on the stage. I could not push him anymore to share his stories. This problem became reflected in the form of the theatre piece as well because, in the performance, the South Korean actor was mainly asking the North Korean refugee questions. These two individuals were not equally present on the stage: it was the actor who investigated the North Korean refugee on a stage in South Korea, which has a society in which violence and prejudice against North Korean refugees are common. To a certain extent, one could say that this form made visible how North Korean refugees are experiencing the reality of South Korean society. Still, we were not able to swing between the personal view and this historic structure. We were kind of stuck in one person's private experience. Also, one of the critics criticized this work as too emotional. He claimed that it is just consoling one individual and does not touch the fundamental, the social and political structure.

TUCHMANN: May I ask about this actor who refused to become personal on stage? Was he getting tired of repeating his story, or was he refusing to turn himself or herself into a document of history? Was he refusing to become a building block of your aesthetics? What exactly happened?

LEE: I think he's just such a person. I don't know exactly why. He thinks that being just one individual on stage somehow restricts his possibility of representing the world more diversely.

TUCHMANN: This refusal of "just being there" is interesting to me. There seems to be an emerging mistrust and disengagement with the personal story, with the "real thing" on stage. What do you think, why are people having difficulties nowadays in presenting and reading reality?

NIKITIN: I think I understand this actor's reaction. I have also seen such protests with actors I worked with who had problems telling their personal stories on stage. When you go on stage and are asked by a director or a writer to portray your personal life, you are usually not the one who has authorship, let alone the one who holds the means of production. It's a tricky situation. People who go on stage in these documentary formats are, after all, not only asked to portray themselves and their personal story, but to do so under their own name. It's not so easy to keep track of things as a performer. The distance to the material is missing. You have no control over the outcome. Some, therefore, feel exposed, become insecure, distrustful.

In my case, at some point, that was the reason I started writing the texts myself. That made it more playful and less difficult for the actors because they didn't have to cannibalize their personal lives with their own words. Another tool I often use in that context is to claim that everything is potentially fake—to subvert the sense of unambiguity, in the sense of "this is me" and "this is real" and "this is documentary." In this way, the biographical space can become a space of play. I think reality and identity are something complicated today. Many people are no longer willing to simply reproduce uncritically the narratives they have been told and taught for so long. At the same time, many people struggle to be visible and have a right to show their identity. It's just very ambivalent. And I think the theatre space is a very interesting space for these ambivalences.

ZHAO: I was impressed by your *Hamlet* I saw in Zurich back a few years ago. I experienced what you said: You constantly questioned the border between theatre and reality in your performance. I want to suggest something to Kyung-Sung about the situation with this South Korean actor and his confrontation with the person from North Korea. When working with my theatre collective, we welcome anyone who wants to join, and they can leave at any time. When some of them become very active in their participation, I usually

have to accept most of the ideas they contribute. I have no other choice. I would not say: This is not so interesting, or this is not a good response, or this is not something I really want. But it is exactly from this limitation that the most interesting part of my work starts, which is all about searching and finding the connection between these different people's responses. For example, when this Korean actor doesn't want to present himself anymore, maybe we could just show this as it is—and to invite others to react to this. So if the reality is the refusal to talk about personal matters on stage when confronting a North Korean refugee, can we present how we try to work this out? When I started working on *World Factory*, quite a few of the members of *Grass Stage* had no interest in this theme or knew very little about industrial workers. So, in the beginning, we produced a lot of clichés about the workers, about the worker's community, and some very different ideologies came through the responses. I don't judge them. I rather try to find the connection between all these different attitudes. So maybe, this actor of Kyung-Sung's, who doesn't want to say anything about himself on stage, is also an interesting starting point.

TUCHMANN: This book project has two layers of inquiry. One is all about archiving your theatrical approaches. The second layer seeks to archive the work and the belief system of our dramaturgy faculty in Beijing. The understanding of dramaturgy that we teach in Beijing expands how we understand and make theatre. Therefore, I also want to ask you what dramaturgy actually means to you. How do you understand the concept of dramaturgy in relation to your practice? When did you encounter this term? I am particularly asking this question, because I feel that all your works share a very radical notion of dramaturgy. All of your projects had to be established against the market, against the ruling canon, against what was there when you started. So I just want to throw that idea of dramaturgy at you and let you play around with it. Feel free to comment on it, deny or support it.

NIKITIN: Actually, I hardly use the term dramaturgy. But it's interesting to think about it. A recurring motif for me is certainly the play with the real and the supposedly real. I'm interested in the simultaneity of these two levels—a theatre that oscillates between the documentary as something based on facts and as something that only looks like it's based on facts. I mix documentary forms with fiction, and with fiction, I mean the possibility of reinventing yourself. I think most of my works try to blur the idea of identity—even the identity of the pieces themselves. Some people would call them documentary, some would say they're not documentary at all. I would always claim that they are both at the same time. This could be called, if you like, a dramaturgy, from a conceptual point of view.

If I look at it from the practical level, I would say that for me dramaturgy is the organization of the experience of time. You could call it composition. It's

very much about how an audience is experiencing time or realizing that time is an experience at all. It's something that happens with your body; it's about aging, even if it is just the aging together that occurs in two hours. That said, the idea of dramaturgy would interest me at a technical level—to understand it as a craft. I think it allows us to be less ideological. But I'm not sure.

TUCHMANN: In China, the concept of dramaturgy is highly debated: We have all these discussions around its translation and whether this profession is applicable to the Chinese theatre market. Wen Hui and Zhao Chuan, could you talk us through your understanding of these discussions. I don't know about the debates in Korea, Kyung-Sung, so maybe you can tell us a little bit about them. I remember that there are new, young artists like Yi Danbi, who identify as dramaturgs. So there seems to be an increasing focus around dramaturgy in Korea as well.

LEE: Starting from the last decade, we have established a certain position for dramaturgs in the National Theatre and at big public theatres. I think the Korean theatre has adopted the German theatre system in that sense. In the theatre academies, though, we do not have any departments for dramaturgy. It is usually graduates in theatre studies who become dramaturgs. In the independent theatre scene, the role or position of dramaturg differs from these main theatres. I sometimes worked with a dramaturg, and it was very helpful, but I'm not sure if I always would like to tour with a dramaturg. I mean, dramaturgy is an important position, but at the same time, what the dramaturg does is interfering with the director's job. Further, I think dramaturgy is not really rooted deeply in the existing Korean theatre system: You can find dramaturgs being part of some productions, but they are not needed for others. I think dramaturgy means finding the relations between materials. What I mean by "finding the relations between the material" is, in other words, to deconstruct the center. Dramaturgy is directed against making theatre too neat, or too understandable, because the reality is much more complex. But having said that, it does not mean that I personally always need a dramaturg to create my work.

WEN: I think in my practice, the dramaturg is my interlocutor, who triggers discussions in a rehearsal. So this position is very important to me. Sometimes it is precisely the dialogue with a dramaturg that gives me space to breathe. I think Kai knows that quite well. I liked working with him very much. One of my favorite things working with Kai was how deeply he observed our improvisations, how he was reading any instance from the outside. I think we dancers are just doing what we do on the stage, and we try to live in the very instance—and Kai's reading really transformed and transported these instances into reflections, into new tasks, and even into new ways to explore. Also, Kai, you are the first person in my working history who is a professional

dramaturg, because, in China, we haven't really had a concept of professional dramaturgy, but what we always had before were friends visiting rehearsals.

ZHAO: For me, it is a real luxury to have a dramaturg to work with. It's really a luxury to have support from this kind of "other" knowledge. And this is why I do understand the purpose of the faculty at the Central Academy and also Li Yinan's immense efforts to bring this concept of dramaturgy to China. Now actually, this concept has become very popular in China. I see many different productions that include dramaturgs in their casts. It seems to me, however, that they do quite different things, and some of my friends who are theatre makers suddenly started to call themselves dramaturgs. They began to work under this title even without having a director or scriptwriter in their production. So, somehow "dramaturg" becomes a very fashionable job and a powerful position. I find this is interesting. This deconstructs the concept of what dramaturgy actually is and what it is supposed to do, but also comes with new possibilities.

NIKITIN: I, by the way, try to avoid working with dramaturgs.

TUCHMANN: But this does not mean that your work has no dramaturgy—like you just explained. I assume there is a dramaturgy, even (and maybe sometimes because) there is no dramaturg around. Dramaturgy primarily concentrates on how a performance programs its relationship with an audience. So dramaturgy lives as something that is practiced and has been around much longer than the idea of directing.

NIKITIN: I wonder actually if this idea of dramaturgy is not deeply embedded in German conversations, because when I talk, for example, to French colleagues, they very often say that dramaturgy is a very German thing, in the sense that one attempts to separate dramaturgy as a discipline from a group's artistic practice or a director. I don't think that you can extract dramaturgy. Especially in contemporary theatre and performance, the dramaturgy is almost identical with aesthetics, the aesthetic framework, and the handwriting of the artist or the group. If you decide as an artist to work primarily with non-fictional material, or to make projects with groups of people who are not educated in acting, like factory workers, then that is a dramaturgical decision. And I think, nowadays, it has a lot to do with what artists are doing anyway.

TUCHMANN: My last question starts from this luxury position we are in now: We can look back at the people we were two and a half years ago, when we did the seminars together in Beijing. As professional theatre-makers, what are the most significant changes, ruptures, and continuities that you would say have occurred in these three and a half years? I do feel that there is a process of mainstreaming the postdramatic. In Germany, the postdramatic aesthetics

goes more and more together with identity politics. It becomes a most favored aesthetic approach because it allows individual performers to put their case on stage. In China, there is quite a tendency towards happenings and performance art. You cannot go in a shopping mall without encountering performances, and more and more spaces are opened up for happenings: Deserts, beaches, factories, everywhere is site-specific performance. What started as a kind of an alternative, highly political enterprise, like the early *juchang* works of the 1980s, becomes entangled in mainstream and consumerism now.

How do you respond with your practices against these trends of mainstreaming the postdramatic, of mainstreaming *juchang*, of mainstreaming performance art? Is there something particular in your work that reacts to this trend and tendency?

ZHAO: Sometimes it's kind of sad, because when I start conversations or have to give talks, I introduce myself as a theatre-maker, but actually in China, it's very difficult for us to truly present work in theatres. I do not connect to the Chinese theatre circle. I think Wen Hui is maybe in a similar situation, or at least you understand this. So, I would not even say that we confront the mainstream. We're just not in the whole thing. In the last few years, and especially since the pandemic, expression is even more controlled. I am relating this to make this point—we could not even say we are against something, but rather that now something operates against us. So maybe, up to ten years ago, we were trying to push the boundaries; now we are pushed back. The red lines are moving towards us. In terms of practice, we are in a pretty difficult situation. In the past decade, the spaces for us to work have become more and more limited. On the one hand, this is due to the tightening of control; on the other hand, it is a result of commercialization: Everything costs money. The theatre scene in China is very vibrant. But it is a very different concept to what municipal theatre means in Europe. Theatre in Europe typically would respond to the current political situation, to urgent issues, more or less. But in China, theatre means something else. It is not daring to touch the real situation. People are afraid. You understand this very well.

At the moment, it's really about survival for us in China. When we started in the new millennium's first decade, I found spaces and possibilities to work. But now, sometimes I even think I should move out because there are so few possibilities left. It is quite a powerless feeling.

WEN: I absolutely agree with what Zhao Chuan said about the Chinese situation. I don't know very much about the situation of German-speaking theatre, but in China right now, it is difficult. Six, seven years ago, there was much more space. For example, our *Living Dance Studio* was based in a big space in Caochangdi. Kai, you lived there with us for a while. We had our own theatre and presentations there, and we basically did whatever we wanted to do. But now, the government managed to unite the forces of political control and capital,

which gave it even more power. Among the people that are connecting themselves with postdramatic theatre are a lot who are doing so because it is a popular thing to do right now. It is something that fits well into this new power structure of capital and control. It runs a risk of become mainstream. I often think this is not real; what we would need are expressions of political identities. I know that five, six years ago, a piece like Zhao Chuan's *World Factory* could be performed in some theatres. I don't think that is possible today anymore.

ZHAO: Now it's impossible, no no.

WEN: It's impossible! Because you cannot find a place—not even a small space. I am literally talking about physical space here. One could not afford to rent a location these days. Of course, I saw some young artists—they have an opportunity, they have the chance to perform at Wuzhen Festival, but I don't think they are able to do what they want to do completely. Because they get money—they go there, but they cannot do much in artistic terms.

TUCHMANN: Zhao Chuan used the word “powerless,” and I really can sense this feeling of powerlessness that Zhao Chuan and you, Wen Hui, are describing. Do you have any strategies to cope with that situation?

ZHAO: It's really funny and also contradictory: In the beginning I talked about being brave, and now I'm talking about powerlessness. Quite a few years ago, we started to work a lot inside contemporary art museums. Some people criticized us for having “gone arty” instead of keeping our initial connection to society. But to us, appearing in the museums was the only way to get public spaces and get support. But since last year, even museums have become difficult to cooperate with.

It's interesting to see the young generations born from the late '80s or '90s, who were born in an environment in which everything is expressed and done online. In recent years, they realized that the online space has become limited because it is even easier to control by the state. Now in almost every major city there are independent spaces operated by young people. You can go there to stay without paying for any accommodation if you have the right connections. They even made a particular map for this loose network. Sometimes these spaces are connected to art, sometimes they are not. It's not like those alternatives spaces back to the '90s, which mostly were art spaces—facilitating artistic presentations, gatherings, or exhibitions. These spaces established by the young people today are much more living spaces: People live there, doing art or not. Maybe three or four young people share a big apartment, with some spare rooms to host meetings and events. So it's all offline: Meetings, independent film showings, discussions, small activities; also, these places have become a kind of cheap accommodation for young people, who connect

to those alternative circles. There's another boom that takes place offline, namely underground publishing. We've got our documentations of *World Factory* printed in two volumes.

So slowly, you can observe the establishing of new or other marginal channels. They are definitely not dealing with big audiences here. Now, we also started working on small productions that maybe can perform within two or three square meters. For audiences of up to twenty people, we don't need much promotion. Sometimes, promotion creates problems for us. These recent developments only happened in the last two years.

NIKITIN: It sounds a bit like if you were going back to the start; you started working, found places, did projects—and now you're thrown back to the beginning, like a board game. Only real. That's tough and sad.

ZHAO: It's so hard. It's like turning from the public space into private space for the sake of avoiding checks, controls, and repression.

WEN: It is even more difficult than before we started. Because when we started, we just decided not to sell any tickets, and by doing so, we could avoid some censorship, and we got rid of a lot of regulations. We had some space of our own; our friends knew about this situation and supported us. Eventually, we could perform. But now, every place costs a lot of money, and you also have to go through much more censorship.

ZHAO: In the '80s and '90s, they didn't know what we were doing, and thus our work was negotiable.

NIKITIN: It really sounds like a question of technology, of social media, smart-phones, etc. I mean, this whole idea of connecting and creating a network leads to networks of surveillance, observation and self-observation. I think that's the big difference between the '80s and now, because the '80s were obviously much more analog. So the idea of independence is more complicated today because we have internalized this idea of being connected in our bodies, so that it has become more difficult to think of the idea of an alternative space. That's why I'm so interested in what you just said about this new generation, who are trying to find these more analog spaces to escape.

In general, I think our connection to reality has changed a lot within the last ten years, primarily due to a technological shift. In China, it seems that this shift has translated into surveillance, censorship, and then manifested itself in a lack of physical spaces and means of production. While in Switzerland and in Germany, this shift translates itself into metastases of realities: There are extremely many possibilities, but because there are so many possibilities, again, reality becomes indifferent because you simply cannot handle that amount of realities and frames of reference. Of course, that also has to do with

the internet, which uncritically gives in to this idea of globalization, which, in fact, does not exist. What we are doing now is that we are having this conversation between Germany, China, South Korea, and Switzerland. There is an illusion of borderlessness. But I mean, clearly, you two, Zhao Chuan and Wen Hui, are in a different legal system. That's a fact. And it is this technology that we are using right now for having this conversation that is blurring this fact.

ZHAO: Yeah, you're right. It's an illusion.

NIKITIN: If I went to China, I would probably experience the difference a bit more than in a Zoom meeting. Because everything becomes more physical then. I would not experience it as much as you, because I would still be a tourist, just coming and leaving again. So, the consequences for me would not be the same as for you, who experience the boundaries of the reality that has suddenly taken possibilities away from you.

ZHAO: I do agree with you. All these technological mediations of actual meetings between people are a kind of illusion. Technology hides the price that one pays when it weaves different lives together. On the other hand, this weaving together is also a very powerful practice. Just today, at these moments, I shared my project *World Factory* with you, and then I heard the remarks by you, Kyung-Sung, Kai, and Wen Hui, and then I feel that I am not alone. You know it is true. We need all this. We should learn from the virus—people need to meet each other. So now I call my kind of theatre practice “theatre of social contagion.” It is important that the people meet, share, talk and have dialogue.

NIKITIN: I agree. It is. This conversation we're having right now is not an illusion. We're having a real discussion and are exchanging ideas, and that is important. But it's an illusion that we're sharing the same space. The illusion of “globalization.” I mean, we actually live in different spaces and in different legal systems that shape our identities and bodies in different ways. We can't escape the fact that we have to deal with real space, and that real struggle always relates to the legal-political system that does something to your bodies and the bodies of the people around you. I think the dilemma we face is that the internet—and by that, I mean digital publics in particular—on the one hand create possibilities, but at the same time make us forget that we are physical bodies and experience the world with our bodies.

TUCHMANN: Wen Hui and Zhao Chuan talked about these new, harsher, more brutal circumstances in China. Are they related to the pandemic and how digital surveillance is used to observe people and take space away? I mean, can you comment on the question of if, and if so, how far the pandemic has contributed to this situation of powerlessness?

WEN: That's a good question. I don't think it is the pandemic that caused this situation. I think it is due to the politics that is constantly merging the powers of capitalism and political control.

ZHAO: I would think the pandemic actually contributed to this situation in the past year, because it allowed the introduction of new technologies to tighten the control of the people. Now the government does not need any reason for collecting your data—it can be perfectly done in the framework of preventing the spread of the pandemic. Some of those policies were not that easy to install before. Now, in the name of the war against the pandemic, everything is so easy.

LEE: One change that I can describe is that until 2018, Korean society experienced many incidents and social changes. The social reality of this time was very powerful. Many of the artists, including myself, struggled to find a strategy to reflect these events and social changes on stage, for example, the Sewol ferry disaster. But after those times, I feel like I'm much too focused on the use of art in society. I want to be more free from that these days. I want art to reflect society—but there has to be more than just dealing with issues on the stage. I want to find a different strategy to reflect on them. Where to start with this is one of my questions. Also, in the Korean theatre scene, "political correctness" was a big issue, and how one could represent queer or disabled people on stage. Many mainstream theatres were trying to bring these topics on stage, but when they take them and represent them on stage, it does not really reflect the people who are directly involved in these identity struggles. I mean, these pieces are raising the issues, but in a way, they simply distort the reality with a particular formula or convention of making theatre.

Sometimes they use the term postdramatic as a strategy to stage these topics, but in that sense, postdramatic theatre becomes like a genre.

NIKITIN: Sorry, did you just say it becomes a jungle?

LEE: Genre. G-E-N-R-E.

NIKITIN: Ah, because I sometimes think it also has become a jungle.

LEE: This is the Korean theatre reality as I am facing it now. I've also been presenting my work in several mainstream theatres, but now I'm trying to get away from those contexts and to explore how to position myself independently.

TUCHMANN: It was indeed very interesting—also partly saddening—to learn how your aesthetics and production contexts have changed over the last two

and a half years. I want to thank you all for taking the time and making this conversation happen.