

# Rates of Exchange: The Flying Circus Project in the Context of the Knowledge Economy.

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My thanks to Ong Keng Sen, artistic director of the Flying Circus Project for allowing me to participate and for making available the documentation I shall be using in this paper.

Over the first three weeks of December 2000, seventy-two performing artists from all over East Asia, along with some from America and Australia, and numerous observers, converged on the premises of Singaporean theatre company Theatreworks, to participate in the third Flying Circus Project (hereafter referred to as the FCP). The previous two had been held at the same place in 1996 and 1998. In following an intensive timetable, which included structured workshops, group improvisations (which were known as 'reinventions' because they involved responses to the structured work), presentations and discussions, each artist attempted to interrogate his or her practice in relation to that of others. I attended both in my capacity as a former resident artist with Theatreworks, and as an academic researcher. As an informal, rather than an 'official' participant, I observed most of the workshops, participated in group projects, contributed to discussions, and joined in performances when I got the urge.

This marginal status, as academic and artist, observer and participant, informs the multiple perspectives I have on the project, and illuminates the varied priorities which can be brought to bear in discussing it. There is a strong temptation, however, to polarise these priorities. Specifically, ideological concerns about an arts organisation from a rich country drawing on international arts foundation funding to 'buy in' artists from the surrounding region can be pitted against a veneration for what was worked out by the artists *in practice*. There is certainly some validity in both these perspectives, but one can only move beyond them by considering them in a bit more detail.

On the one hand, the sheer dazzling diversity of skilled performers spending three intensive weeks working through problems of practice, interpretation and representation can easily lend a purple tinge to one's prose, and a mythologising gloss to one's assessment of what was achieved. This danger is multiplied exponentially by such a self-consciously 'intercultural' project, because of the

temptation to describe it as somehow transcending power relations, and occurring in some great leveling playground, beyond language and discourse, where economic disparities do not matter, and cultural difference is simply a perpetual-motion generator of creativity.

On the other hand, it is possible to be overly concerned with these economic disparities, thereby reducing the entire Flying Circus Project to the level of accountancy. An impoverished activity in itself, there are nonetheless ideological issues at stake here, which do have some mileage. One could justifiably assess, for example, the degree to which staging the project enacts what Pierre Bourdieu calls the 'gentle violence' of accumulating 'symbolic capital', not least in the context of the Singapore government's desire to position the State as a regional cultural 'hub.' However, an enquiry of this nature is more proper to the realms of cultural policy, since it is primarily concerned with what might be termed the 'external' circumstances of the project – its institutional profile. Moreover, I am wary of the academic desire for ideological happy endings by identifying points of resistance to dominant power relations. To state those power relations in advance of attending to the practice threatens to predetermine what one reads in it.

In short, approaching the FCP requires an ideological awareness which is not pre-emptive, and a sensitivity to practice which resists the mythic. Although I have just described the limitations of assessing the project in terms of Bourdieu's symbolic capital, I think nonetheless it retains two productive elements. First, there is the use of economic metaphors. As the title of this conference attests, the explosion of the globalisation debate in the past few years has led to the use of economic terminology and models in a wide range of fields of enquiry. Second, there is geo-political specificity. In Singapore, recently judged by American Foreign Policy magazine as the most 'global city' in the world, it is this 'economism' (as Bourdieu would put it), rather than 'difference' *per se*, which presses in on the arts, even when, as with the FCP, the event is not a government funded initiative.

How was the FCP framed, and what did the participants do in response? This is not only the most pressing question for me, but also the central challenge for many involved in the project. Specifically, positioning oneself in relation to diverse other artists required reference to the organising binary of the project, namely the 'traditional' and the 'contemporary.' Ironically, however, the success of the previous two FCP workshops has problematised the distinction between the two terms.

Despite the diversity of the group profile, the skills-bases, interests and even histories of the core participants in the third FCP were such that all were 'contemporary' to some degree. This fact was underlined by the presence of Tibetan and Chinese ritualists, whose performance philosophy threw the contemporariness of even the most apparently traditional performers, such as the Cambodian court dancers, into sharp relief. Alternative terms were therefore necessary to enable distinctions to be made within the group, and so it was that 'contemporary' became informally but persistently replaced by the term 'conceptual'.

This apparently slight terminological slippage had important implications. Primarily, it cemented a mind/body split. Whereas in the tradition/contemporary binary there is a latent presumption that the traditional is more concerned with physicality, this was not always the case: several Chinese video artists were invited, for example, on the basis of the visceral responses evoked by their work. As the term 'conceptual' became increasingly employed however, the latent distinction became more explicit. The efflorescence of ideas was pitted against the work of the codified body. This was used as a structuring principle as, for example, in an exercise where pre-determined mixed groups of 'conceptual' and 'traditional' artists were invited to respond to the work of a practitioner who occupied a clearly identifiable point on the continuum. The term was also widely used by participants as a term of reference in conversation and group discussions.

This distinction resonates strongly in Singapore at the moment, because it echoes that instituted by the logic of the knowledge economy. What is the knowledge economy? In Singapore the government has decided that, as a tiny nation with few natural resources, the key to economic survival in the coming decades is to make money out of ideas. Or, as a characteristically utilitarian government paper on the arts recently put it: "A vibrant arts and cultural scene will provide people with the stimuli and the opportunities to create products and services that are innovative and value-adding."(Renaissance City Report: 1999)

As is the norm with the messianic approach to selling a business concept, the flip-side of this value-adding is glossed over. As Anthony Giddens describes it: "Information and knowledge have now become media of production, displacing many kinds of manual work."(Hutton and Giddens 2001: 22) Less triumphantly reported however, are the knock-on effects of that 'displacement'. To summarise: in Asia, contractors from first-tier Newly Industrialising Economies (NIEs) such as Taiwan,

South Korea, Singapore – oversee this displacement to second-tier NIE's, like Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines. In the process, the manual labour becomes that bit more manual. Lax labour laws and intensive competition mean long hours worked in cramped conditions for low pay in an insecure job. In many respects, this equally describes the agricultural labour many leave behind for the factory. In the latter, however, the body is not only driven hard, but disciplined. Toilet breaks and meal-times are strictly enforced, sickness often threatens employability, even pregnancy-potential is policed (see Klein 2000: 25-33). This is the dark corollary of the knowledge economy.

Now there is clearly no literal connection to be drawn between the *practices* described above and the events of the FCP. Yet the *logic* which informs the knowledge economy within the Singaporean context was nevertheless discernible in the use of the term 'conceptual' I have already described. Two examples:

First, in addition to the 'officially' conceptual artists, such as those from the Chinese and Japanese metropolises, a second group emerged. These were the Singaporeans<sup>1</sup>, who, in distinction to everybody else, were present less because they possessed any specific, identifiable skill, but because they were excellent generalists. Linguistically and culturally, they served as intermediaries and translators, whose strength lay in an ability to absorb all stimuli, and respond rapidly and incisively. In this sense, they were defined by their abilities to *conceptualise*, even to the extent that their significant physical prowess was expected to be used primarily in a 'conceptual' way. Within the Singaporean government's rhetoric of the 'hub', this transcultural adaptability rendered them 'knowledge workers' *par excellence*.

Second was a conflation between the 'conceptual' and the 'technological'. The presence of the video artists and their equipment resulted in a significant 'multi-media' element in the reinventions. In this regard, many artists who did not see themselves (or were not seen) as 'conceptual' explored technological mediation as a mode of broaching this field. However, a run of clumsy and unspectacular results soon led to a backlash against the 'conceptual', and it came to be seen as lacking the substantive creativity of 'live' performance. In particular, the onus shifted back onto

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<sup>1</sup> For the good of the broader argument, I generalise in two senses. First, there were exceptions to this rule. Second, the bulk of the Singaporean participants shared an approach to performance making which reflected their past experience of working for Ong Keng Sen's company, TheatreWorks.

the ‘traditional’ artists to increase their input of skills. This initial faith in the medium as embodiment of the idea is closely related to the status of technologies in the knowledge economy as ‘productive media’ in their own right. However, the ‘backlash’ is of particular interest here, because it indicates the point at which negotiations ‘on the floor’ – that is, in *practice* – started to resist this logic.

For Bourdieu, ‘practice’ is that key aspect of human existence which generates the rules and regulations of social life, but cannot be fully named or described by them. A key reason for this is the extent to which our experience of the world is mediated by culturally specific, *embodied* knowledge, which Bourdieu calls the *habitus*, ‘a product of history’ which: “...ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action...gives practices their relative autonomy with respect to external determinations of the immediate present.” (Bourdieu 1990: 54). In other words, it is all the practical knowledge acquired in the process of growing up in a particular milieu which enables people to deal with novel situations and ‘improvise’ a response which resists being entirely dictated by the laws of these situations.

The implications for the FCP are clear. Practice, as a form of knowledge, can contest ‘external determinations’ such as the logic of the knowledge economy. This does not mean that all practice is automatically oppositional – I observed too many instances of domineering or self-absorbed behaviour in improvisations for that – but it is undeniably the case that the participants demonstrated an endless capacity for generating interpersonal dynamics ‘on the floor’ out of which counter-tendencies to the dominant logic of the project began to emerge. By way of example, I will talk about contentions in the FCP over time.

To ensure that everybody was able to impart and derive the maximum amount from the event, it was rigorously timetabled, and consisted of intensive sessions and long hours. It soon became clear, however, that it was the Singaporeans who were best able to keep pace with the timetable, and produce work accordingly. In other words, the timetable was operating to ‘Singapore time’: a brisk mode of maximising productivity. In the FCP, each artist dealt with this issue differently, depending, to an extent, on their *habitus*. Some slowly disengaged; others rebelled outright. Many adapted more creatively. When challenged on an apparent submissiveness to Singaporean dominance, for example, several performers explained their actions in personal narratives which were based on an experience of

the workshop as a whole, and their journey through it, which bore only a tangential relationship to the scheduled timetable. The practical manifestations of these journeys were unpredictable (and therefore unproductive by conventional standards), but evidenced a processing of stimuli equal if not more intense than that of swifter responses. [I'll be giving an example of this shortly.] At the other extreme, the Chinese video artists worked at an intense, accelerated speed. They would hang back for long periods of time, and then make very quick, guerilla-style interventions into the proceedings.

Thus far, I have described a dominant conceptual logic and resistant practice at work in the FCP. Yet this is too straightforward a narrative. Firstly, as the examples given earlier show, participants were responsible both for instituting this logic and resisting it. Second, further consideration of the time issue demonstrates that the level of the FCP which one might most readily identify as instituting this dominant logic – namely, the directorial – was also instrumental in undermining it.

First, the timetable was subject to constant revision, both in response to, and as a way of re-configuring anxieties about time and speed. In other words, not only was the timetable itself constantly evolving, but people were encouraged to use it differently – for example to pursue particular avenues at the expense of others. Although there was certainly more room to develop this aspect of the project, for me it indicated a paradigm shift from 'Singapore time' to a more plural state in which different experiences and senses of time could co-exist.

Secondly, the dominant Singaporean notion of time and productivity is directly undermined by the lack of tangible product generated by the FCP. It flies in the face, for example of the calculating view of the arts expounded by the Singaporean government. The pressure to produce work in Singapore is inevitably very strong, and although this may seem a bit weak (that is the point), to take all that money, invest all that time and energy *and not have anything tangible to show for it at the end* is actually quite a subversive act. Moreover, it further extends the plural sense of time already mentioned: every participant is at liberty to process the event in his/her *own* time.

Finally, Ong Keng Sen himself has offered an alternative justification for the long hours and intensive work ethic. Of the second FCP, he said:

The participants...had to eat, breathe, think, sleep and dream the Lab... [which] often left them too exhausted to intellectualize. Instead the focus shifted to the body. This was intentional as I believed the process was heavily based on orality, the body as a source of memory/culture, non-literal, and non-rational modes of communications (quoted in Low 1999: 124-5.)

This is of interest because it relates closely to the notion of practice as an important generator of new ideas outlined above. Although the concept-body binary still dominates Ong's description, he implies that, pushed hard enough, the performers will reach a state of creativity where the binary is no longer relevant as an organising principle. This is particularly intriguing, because it reveals a desire on Ong's part to have the very grounds upon which he initiated the project – and, by implication, his own legitimacy – challenged by that which he unleashed. This is a complex and paradoxical position to adopt. On the one hand this 'directorial' level threatens the ability of intercultural collaboration to counter the logic of the knowledge economy, and by implication global capitalism. On the other, the directorial plays an important role in, at the very least, *mediating* resistance to this global logic, and, in certain cases *actively inciting* it. Not only is this paradox unresolvable, a third issue now arises: in *choosing* to incite resistance, even to the grounds upon which that resistance is incited, the directorial level retains a precarious control over *any* challenge to its legitimacy. That this is precisely the logic at work in the Singaporean government's recent decision to actively encourage the arts indicates that such a paradox is perhaps one of the most pervasive and complex issues in considering how artistic practice might relate to the phenomenon of globalisation.

So no ideological happy ending, I'm afraid. In this paper I have attempted to talk about intercultural collaboration in terms of the increasingly strident economic context within which such events take place. In particular, I have argued that this is not simply a matter of playing the ethical accountant, but of considering how this context frames the conceptual and practical levels of the event itself. To a degree,

intercultural practice is able to generate resistance to dominant discourses, but ultimately one cannot essentialise it as such. In the FCP, dominance and resistance co-habited. What is key is rather the *option* to exercise one rather than the other. The onus is on every practitioner, at whatever level, to generate and identify those elements within their chosen field which militate against the utilitarian logic of value-addedness. Then, if I may invoke a nakedly capitalist tactic at this late stage, *to work those elements for all they are worth.*

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