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Morphic Traits



Pan Daijing's work can never be experienced from a safe distance but only through an embodied experience. Sound, light, temperature, and all the small, almost imperceptible transitions of her choreographies operate primarily on the peripheries of perception. I might never fully comprehend the works—but I can feel them living inside me. The work's propositions are paradoxical: rooms appear, at once, empty and filled; encounters tend to be intimate and alienating at the same time. Although often described in terms of performance, her work is neither concerned with presentation nor is it concerned with the nostalgias of process and documentation. I like to think of her work as a fabric of overlapping sequential and synchronous processes or as rich and opaque transmissions.

The work's natural habitat is the grey zone between exhibition and performance-installation: Daijing initially assesses a given space, then activates it by accentuating its qualities through the

addition of light and sound. This sense of motion results from the fact that we see the space twice: first as we experience it in "real life", then as it is recoded in her work. Her treatment energetically charges the space and makes it responsive. The relations between all elements that compose these environments are dynamic, entangled in a rhythmical composition. It is a kind of art that requires a break of routinised forms of perception: suspension of disbelief, as in theatre, or a desire for aesthetic estrangement. Only this will allow the work to temporarily substitute for and partially integrate into the "real world". Great care and attention is put into creating this reality distortion field.

The seed of a work might be an image, a smell, a sound or a story stretched out into three-dimensional space, distributed into discrete moments, or dissolved into an atmosphere, temporarily held together by the carefully choreographed

triangulation of artist/conductor, space/container, and the witnessing bodies. The kernel expands into the witnesses' minds, where it replicates and lives on as memories, plant-like, each idea stemming from the same root but with leaves coloured in different shades of personal interpretation. Such work may be fragile, but it's not frail. "The work" (I want to use quotation marks here, contesting any claim for unity and completeness) operates across multiple dimensions simultaneously; in the moment in which it manifests itself, it simultaneously morphs into another form and is distilled into a memory or a film, a photograph, another idea, another constellation of still and moving images. Morphing is an effect that sees one shape transform into another in a seamless transition. It's a gradual process, now often used to describe the special effects of cinematic animation. This is why it seems so fitting a term for Daijing's work, which engages and challenges animation and liveness.

While these morphic traits are not magic, they are definitely more magical than the classical model of broadcaster / receiver, which has governed both the exhibition and the event space for a long time. Because of its morphic traits, the work cannot be captured; it is best approached through metaphor, something that stands in for what one can see or hear but cannot obtain. The essential ingredients can be condensed into a recipe, but, like a meal, it will always have to be made anew; the acts will have to be adapted to what's at hand and how many participate in the feast. As the work morphs, whether by itself, by the artist's hand, or by the time of day, it also affects its surroundings.

For Pan Daijing, every work is less a discrete object or isolated instance but rather a moment linked backwards and forwards to others. This thought was lingering in my mind as I stepped into the

hazy atrium of Berlin's Martin Gropius Bau in 2020, where a friend of mine performed in Daijing's *Dead Time Blue*. Just a few months earlier, I had been at the premiere of her opera *Tissues* in London, and its impressions were still resonating within me. The individual performer had been dissolved in a meshwork of tones, voice, space, and instrument, all existing in both consonance and dissonance with each other. Now, in Berlin, I was carried by the awe of anticipation and relieved to re-encounter traces of the previous piece and its protagonists. In my head, both works built on each other in a seamless continuation, pre-image and after-image, forming a mesmerising landscape filled with disembodied and live opera voices.

Daijing often refers to her compositions and choreographies in terms of landscape. This word, in particular, has denoted very different things throughout the changing histories of art. It was only recently that I found the term "landscape dramaturgy" in Ana Vujanović's essay *Meandering Together*, from 2017. Vujanović ties the notion to Gertrude Stein's concept of the "landscape play," where the landscape on stage has nothing to do with the "natural landscape" but rather with the principles of collage and montage as introduced in the cinema and visual arts of Stein's time. Repetition, multiplication, and simultaneity are all narrative tools that we find in her performances and videos. Timing is one possible key to connecting to her choreographies. But, as the artist herself has often stressed, these efforts are merely supporting acts for what Susan Sontag calls the "hallucinatory detail". Any driving action, voice, or movement could suddenly retreat into the background in favour of an off-centre detail that catches the artist's attention. Reaching into cinema's lexicon, Daijing characterises this strategy as "zooming in". This inverse relationship of landscape and figure is what links Vujanović's landscape dra-

maturity to Daijing's endeavour. The idea of a work that I am part of, that I cannot measure except with my own senses, that turns me, whether performer or audience member, from the figure in the foreground into a detail among other objects in the landscape.

Aside from the collective moments of arrival and exit, the audience is free to organise their space-time during the performances. All performers are present, but their attention is turned inwards as if they were unaware of being watched. Long shots and distant views are reproduced through light that tenderly frame silhouettes and cast long shadows. The scene might seem undetermined, and everything may appear to be of equal importance. We witness her works as an assortment of differently paced micro-events and seemingly inconsequential actions: interruptions, transitions, intervals, in-between moments. The audience isn't being told where to look.

There are usually no metatexts in her work; neither wall texts nor pamphlets containing "must-have" info to arrest shallow attention. Moving among the performers, the artist observes the different levels of uncertainty rising in those present. One must take in everything, every tiny detail. However, it is usually not possible to see or hear all the materials created by performers because other people are around and obstruct one's gaze or because several scenes are happening simultaneously. And, while everyone has their own individual view, there is always a whole that no one can witness. This is not unlike the ways we experience the "real" or "immediate" world outside of the artwork, which, constantly shaken by unthinkable disasters, becomes increasingly difficult to comprehend.

Indeed, moving through the landscape of Daijing's work is quite similar to doomscrolling: there is uncanniness, concu-

rent with a certain collective jouissance in the mesmerised contemplation of "The End Of It All"; the feeling of being doomed, of always being too late, for the end has already happened many times.

Her work exudes a deep distrust in the organisation of the world. And this fuels its morphic traits and activates its reality distortion field. "The only way to situate ourselves as an audience in this world [the artwork] is to enter as one of the components of that unstructured world, to meander through it together with performers and other audience members," as Vujanović puts it. Ever so slightly, the work morphs the audience's perception. By tempting the audience members to position themselves within the landscape, Daijing's choreographies suspend the perspectival order that constructs the landscape from the position of the first-person singular. Instead, she introduces an impersonal view. Perspective creates reality. Perspective is how we approach or "think" the world. The result of the first-person singular perspective is individualism and anthropocentrism. Within the artwork's reality distortion field, these modes are relinquished in favour of an impersonal perspective.

One biography of Pan Daijing states that the artist is "[...] seeking a means of connection beyond the human condition". Eugene Thacker, whose resourceful philosophical exploration of horror is my guide to the borders of the human condition, writes: "While we can never experience the world-in-itself, we seem to be almost fatalistically drawn to it, perhaps as a limit that defines who we are as human beings." Anxiety and fear are an important part of that definition, and Daijing knows this all too well. Her work is often perceived as gloomy and haunting. This is apparent in her dedication to nuanced dissonance in music, to rumbling electronics and mourning voices, to droopy tone-in-tone fabrics and dimly

lit spaces. On a dramaturgical level, the effect of doom is created through the compositional / choreographic role of the landscape and the device of impersonal perspective. This detached way of experiencing is deeply disorienting and requires far more than an embrace of aesthetic estrangement or the suspension of disbelief. Of course, these are still needed because, as noted earlier, we are all part of the landscape; nobody ever witnesses the whole. The work remains hidden in plain sight.

Nevertheless, it's undoubtedly there, here and now, and it requires everyone to reorient in relation to its unstructured world — one in which there is no barrier to demarcate or mediate between that which Thacker calls the “world-in-itself” and what Vujanović refers to as the “thingness of the world” — and the immediate reality, which we can perceive with our sensory faculties. Accepting to be part of something that one cannot comprehend equals accepting to be doomed. However, if doom is a dominant condition, it may become generative, a beginning rather than an end. Surrendering, one might gain acuity of perception and develop new sensitivities or supernatural capacities. By giving up the magic circle of the stage, the performance score, and even the hierarchical order of gaze, her work amplifies the blurriness of the individual and that which lies beyond it, reaching for a different kind of connection to the world.

Her quest for connection is not just social. Early on, she invites other-than-human agents into play. The streetlights in front of the Pavillon Sicli in Geneva had a key role in her ensemble of performers for *Tissues I: A Prologue* (2018). Her pet — a tortoise — starred in the performance *In Service of a Song* (2017/18). Since reality is constructed by our sensory faculties, the world as inhabited by a human being does not only look or feel

different; it is different from the world inhabited by, for example, the tortoise. Here I quote from the artist's statement on the work *In Service of a Song*:

[...] a musical work without sound. It invites the viewer to experience the possibilities of sonic imagination. Four improvised performances, each lasting thirteen minutes, took place on consecutive days inside a soundproofed installation. Surrounded and filled to ankle height with soil, the structure appeared to have forced its way into the building through the floor, like a plant growing through a crack in the concrete. Inside this installation [...] the artist was joined by an array of sculptures [...] and her own tortoise, the only living organism to witness the performance from inside.

As the audience circulates the perspex shed in which the artist moves and sings for and with her tortoise, their shifting views destabilise a clearly displayed ground. This multiplicity of perspectives will later be highlighted in an installation of the same work that includes four videos that capture the performance event from different angles. For the audience outside the box, the only stimulus accessible is the visual strata. As described by the artist, it generates hallucinatory details of the auditory elements. The tortoise stands for a radically different perspective on the same event: The animal is known to be incredibly sensitive to vibration, hearing only the sound frequency range between 50 and 1000 Hz. What is on display in the perspex shed is that which lies beyond human comprehension. And notably, this is not the horror of the unhuman or the supernatural. It's just another nature. And according to Pan Daijing, it is music.

In chronological terms, *In Service of a Song* is the forerunner in a series of experiments in how we navigate through

a world that is not there for us alone and how we, as humans, inscribe ourselves within it. The reality distortion field of her work makes it possible — or necessary — to coexist with the world-in-itself. *In Service of a Song* reminds us of the coexistence of myriad ways of perceiving the real. Adding another element to her bodily sensorium, Daijing often records her surroundings with a handheld video camera. Even during her own music performances, she records her audience. Her work consists primarily of affects and experiences — not only concepts, technical riders, or musical scores. She records her audience because she is looking for patterns that systematise experience, theirs and hers. During rehearsals, she would sometimes revisit these patterns with each performer individually and relentlessly. The observations of affects emanate into poetic gestures such as *Footnote* (2023), a mix of bone meal and volcano powder dried up dripping from the wall at Grazer Kunstverein. It suggests that the walls have been sweating, oozing struggle or desire in reaction to something they have witnessed. The seven drops resemble the seven notes of the major scale, pulled down the wall by gravity; their shape is a manifestation of uncertainty. The writer Carlos Kong remembers these drips being “suspended in animation”, basically time morphing into visual matter.

Pan Daijing's work never follows a single tempo. It is a reminder that various systems in our bodies, including the cardiovascular, metabolic, and reproductive systems have their own “peripheral circadian clocks”, which cycle through active and resting phases. In fact, the same is true for the trillions of cells and microbes that make us who we are. The impersonal perspective offered by her work assumes the potential liveness of everything and everyone. It expresses how everything is both present and, at the same time, latently effective.

Strengthening this sensation, time is considerably slowed down in all facets of her work. The performers' movements evoke long-exposure photographs, leaving the traces of former movements visible. It's worth noting here that, in an early interview, she refers to the dancer Noah Eshkol, who was famous for her minimalist dance choreographies and precise graphic dance notations inspired by architecture and second-order cybernetics. The treatment of individual body parts as separate instruments, of moving the human body in an “unhuman” way, reverberates in her gestural choreographies. However, her performers never dance in that way. If it were not confusing, I would say they morph like moving images. Nevertheless, Daijing's images, live and recorded, often seem to emerge from a void, as, for example, in the self-portrait *Metal* (2023).

The artist experiments with the principles of extreme reduction, minimum contrast, and the imperceptible. She is an expert in the simple but impactful operation of subtraction. The darkness of the background and the lack of clarity in the landscape hint at the images' imaginative construction. Her images are never literal. We might interpret them as daydreams or liken them to narcotic hallucinations or to digital emanations. The first thing that comes to my mind is that they may be made for a different kind of eye.

Similarly, her landscapes usually stand in stark contrast to the norms of the conventional gallery space with its hyper-vigilant illumination. Daijing's attraction to threshold states, such as penumbra, gloaming, and gloom, invoke the reverse. In the dark, we don't differentiate easily. The two-channel video *Moss* (2021), which was later partly integrated into the five-channel video installation *Grief Lessons* (2023), begins with a whistling sound and the image of a lighthouse

Dead Time Blue

rhythmically roving over a rough sea. On the second screen, a flickering light reluctantly reveals a large and presumably empty indoor space housing an ominous apparatus. An abrupt cut suggests the clashing or colliding of times, and the image changes to a long and damp concrete tunnel. The camera looks towards the light at the end of the tunnel or to a looming apocalypse. Like the poetic streetlight, the singing tortoise, and the sweating wall, the shelter-tunnel might be a hallucinatory detail. None of the above may ever take shape (again), remaining visual echoes in the head. We create them as we meander through Pan Daijing's reality distortion fields and stare at the performers' dimly lit faces, trying to make out where they move. In *Moss* (2021), they crawl and walk over vast fields of red rubble, their bodies almost the size of small rocks.

Daijing's morphic traits reveal the obscurity of the world. Her works, in their different shapes and shades, ignite our fascination with all that remains inexplicable and out of reach. Diminishing the individual and letting the surroundings come to the fore, the impersonal perspective offered by her work is not about the end of a fractured, brittle self; rather, it constitutes a form of sublimation. Her spiritually nourishing doom is akin to awe, a mechanism for collective survival in an unstructured universe.

