

# Critical Acts

## The Stage as a Drawing Board Zuni Icosahedron's Architecture Is Art Festival

**Rossella Ferrari**

As audiences enter the Grand Theatre of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre to attend *Looking for Mies*, one of the core productions of the Architecture Is Art Festival (AIAF) 2009, they are each supplied with a 1-100 scale drawing of the side elevation and stage plan, in lieu of the conventional playbill. Following a brief preamble delivered by an actor, also printed on the drawings along with the production credits and other information about the performance, a chronometer begins ticking, and for 10 minutes the spectators are left alone to wonder—each with a text to read and a plan in hand to try to make sense of the show that is about to commence. Despite its name, the AIAF—conceived and directed by Mathias Woo of Zuni Icosahedron—is not simply a festival of art and architecture but also, and largely, a festival of theatre. It is a celebration of architecture and theatre or, rather, of architecture in theatre and architecture as theatre—the first of its kind in Asia and possibly worldwide. It is also a festival of music—musical theatre, theatre music, classical opera, electronic noise—and an interdis-

ciplinary exploration of the triangular relations among the three media. Or, as phrased by Qin Lei of *Domus China* as he introduced one of the programs of the concert series *Architecture is... Discourse with Music*, the AIAF is an opportunity to “listen to architecture, and observe music” (Qin 2009).<sup>1</sup>

Since its establishment in 1982 Zuni Icosahedron has been at the forefront of Hong Kong's alternative culture and has grown over the years into a leading force in Asian avant-garde theatre. Born as a dance and performance group, Zuni has consistently strived to defy theoretical pigeonholing and strict disciplinary classifications and has configured itself as a nomadic entity, a company of travelers—through media, forms, concepts, and aesthetic domains. Artistic director Danny Yung and his associates have created more than a hundred performances as well as videos, installations, and other artworks. They have also engaged extensively in arts criticism, publishing, education, and cultural policymaking.<sup>2</sup> Interactivity, intertextuality, hybridism,

1. The author would like to acknowledge the support of Zuni Icosahedron and of the Journalism and Media Studies Centre of the University of Hong Kong.

2. Besides publishing catalogues, annual reports, essay collections, and monographs (mostly by Woo and Yung) documenting their own creative endeavors, in the early 1990s Zuni established a Cultural Policy Study Group through which they issued a number of reports evaluating the work of the local arts councils and other institutions. They have been active in public consultation and cultural advocacy ever since. They have masterminded several educational programs to promote creative work (performance, video-making, visual arts) among the local youth and the wider community such as the *Black Box Exercise* (since 1995), the *Multimedia Theatre Education Scheme* (since 2000), and *Zuni Youth* (since 2003). Since 2001 they have been publishing the self-funded cultural magazine *E+E*.

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transmediality, journeying, mapping, and searching are all keywords for accessing the world of Zuni, and the AIAF matches the versatility, cross-disciplinarity, and investigative aptitude that have become synonymous with the group.

This inquisitive bent is reflected by the four grounding interrogatives that were devised by Mathias Woo—a trained architect turned theatremaker who is also a prominent essayist, cultural commentator, and Zuni executive director—to provide a structure for the festival: What is architecture? What is Chinese architecture? What is City Odyssey? What is West Kowloon? Woo’s interrogatives underscore artistic matters (architecture, art, theatre, and their mutual relations), cultural concerns (traditional theatre, aesthetics and architecture, modernist theories and designs), and ways to “develop a path that is intrinsically ours” (Yang and Woo 2009:13). They launch an inquiry into philosophical musings (the practice of “city odysseying,” of 21st-century *flânerie*, of walking, watching, and experiencing metropolitan spaces and soundscapes), and sociopolitical demands (the public debate over the planning and construction of the controversial West Kowloon Cultural District).<sup>3</sup> The fifth implied interrogative, which informs most of Woo’s stage excursions, pertains to the conceptual relations, affinities, and shared “constraints” of theatre and architecture with respect to factors of space, stasis, motion, materiality, mechanics, time, and technique (see Au 2001).

The creative team—a mixed crowd of architects, designers, video artists, performers, photographers, composers, cartoonists, and arts critics—engaged a variety of forums and media to voice their questions. Weeks before the opening, a series of postcards displaying the phrase “Architecture is” (followed by a blank space) were spread through the city’s major venues so that the public could actively intervene and contribute their ideas. Some responses were printed in the AIAF promotional booklet and follow-up questionnaires and feedback forms were distributed to audiences after each performance. These interac-



Figure 1. Promotional postcard for the Architecture Is Art Festival 2009, directed by Mathias Woo, produced by Zuni Icosahedron, Hong Kong Cultural Centre, 1 September–18 October 2009. (Courtesy of Zuni Icosahedron)

tive strategies constitute a defining element of Zuni’s artistic-activist tradition and are, in fact, performative practices in their own right. The pictorial questionnaires designed by Yung—often originating from specific stage productions but then extending to broader issues in the public sphere—have been discussed as bona fide artworks (Chung 2003), and Zuni previously employed postcards as vehicles of public interrogation and civil activism. One example is a set issued in August 1997 to probe the responsibilities (or lack thereof) of the Chinese and British governments over the question of Hong Kong’s handover to the People’s Republic of China on 1 July 1997 (see Finlay 1997). Another such postcard, addressed to former Hong Kong Governor Chris Patten, was distributed in 1994 to raise awareness about matters of artistic censorship in the former British colony in the run-up to the sovereignty transfer.

The AIAF four-part program, each part corresponding to one of the questions, was highly eclectic—comprising three exhibitions, two conferences, two music events, and five stage performances over the course of seven weeks in September and October 2009. The first exhibition, *My Modern Architects*, was connected to part one (What is architecture?) and focused on the legacies of Le Corbusier (1887–1965),

3. See also the AIAF e-learning project and virtual tour of West Kowloon on the RTHK (Radio Television Hong Kong) website [www.rthk.org.hk/elearning/architecturetour/westkowloon.htm](http://www.rthk.org.hk/elearning/architecturetour/westkowloon.htm).

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969), and Louis I. Kahn (1901–1974). The large interactive display *The Forbidden City* was linked to part two (What is Chinese architecture?), and *Rethinking the Cultural Waterfront* to part four (What is West Kowloon?). Public seminars and lectures on Chinese architecture were held through the festival along with the City-to-City Cultural Exchange Conference on cultural space and cultural development, which Zuni has organized for several years with partners from Taipei, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. The music program opened with *Architecture is... Discourse with Music*, a series of electronic music performances by local and foreign composers such as Sin:Ned, Aenon Loo, Alok, KWC, and Zuni founding member Pun Tak Shu—all from Hong Kong—and João Vasco Paiva of Portugal. Each evening the performances were followed by lectures by well-known Chinese architects (Liu Jiakun, Zhu Xiaodi, Wang Shu, and Zhang Lei). The electronic concert *City Odyssey* was also a combination of music performances and conversations between composers and critics from Hong Kong, Shanghai, Taipei, and Shenzhen on issues of architecture, urbanism, living (in) the city, and the connections between musical composition, metropolitan space, and urban sound.<sup>4</sup> Among the composer-performers were the Chinese Xu Cheng from Shanghai and Zen Lu (Lu Zheng) from Shenzhen, the Taiwanese sound artist and producer Yao Dajun, and GayBird (Leung Kei

Cheuk) of PMPS (People Mountain People Sea), a prominent record label and independent production company based in Hong Kong.<sup>5</sup>

The five stage productions—*Da Zijin Cheng* (The Forbidden City), *Zijin Cheng youji* (A Tale of the Forbidden City), *Looking For Mies, Corbu and Kahn*, and *Donggong xigong ba zhi Xijulong zhu* (East Wing West Wing 8: West Kowloon Dragon Balls)—were all directed by Woo and altogether highlighted three essential strands of Zuni aesthetics: technological, transmedial, modernist, almost futuristic—as represented by the multimedia performances *Looking for Mies* and *Corbu and Kahn*; intracultural, “archaeological,” focusing on the retrieval and updating of native performance traditions—as illustrated by the two *kunqu* (kun operas), *The Forbidden City* and *A Tale of the Forbidden City*;<sup>6</sup> and a third, exemplified by *East Wing West Wing 8: West Kowloon Dragon Balls*, the eighth installment of an ongoing series of satires on Hong Kong politics and society, which testifies to the company’s sustained engagement with current affairs and civic matters. The performances employed English, Mandarin Chinese, and Cantonese—often mixed—though their strong multimediality and non-dramatic nature did not make linguistic familiarity so relevant in most instances.<sup>7</sup>

All were new creations except the “modern architects series,” which reprised and updated Woo’s previous experiments with “multimedia

4. Woo previously explored the concept of “city odyssey” (*chengshi manyou*) in the multimedia show *2001: A Hong Kong Odyssey* (2000), the animated video *Hong Kong Style* (2006), the mixed-media installation *Hong Kong Odyssey* (11th International Architecture Exhibition, Venice Biennale, 2008), and the photographic book *Mathias Woo Hong Kong Odyssey* (2009).

5. Recordings of GayBird’s multimedia composition for monome and 3D fabric, “The Grid of Elasticity,” are available on YouTube at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=f\\_CZpsKsxVs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_CZpsKsxVs) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KfSgUoS4pl](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KfSgUoS4pl).

6. *The Forbidden City* is a cross between a classic kun opera and a contemporary music concert. It features a kunqu performer (Shi Xiaomei) and a pop singer (Antony Wong Yiu Ming) in the leading roles, original music by Yu Yat Yiu, and lyrics by Nanjing-based librettist Zhang Hong and Zuni members Pia Ho and Cedric Chan. *A Tale of the Forbidden City* is a kun opera starring Shi Xiaomei and Li Hongliang with live musical accompaniment by Dai Peide (percussion) and Xu Jianmin (small gong). Kunqu originated in Southern China in the 16th century.

7. The original titles of the AIAF productions were in English. *The Forbidden City*, *A Tale of the Forbidden City*, and *East Wing West Wing 8: West Kowloon Dragon Balls* were advertised with bilingual English-Chinese titles. The textual projections and recorded speeches by Mies van der Rohe in *Looking for Mies* were in English and the opening preamble was delivered by actor Dick Wong in both Cantonese and English. The text delivered by Cedric Chan in the first part of *Corbu and Kahn* was in Cantonese, whereas the second part, starring Kam Kwok Leung as Louis Kahn, was in English, and so were the recorded speeches by the real-life Kahn. The spoken and singing parts of *The Forbidden City* and *A Tale of the Forbidden City* were in Mandarin Chinese. The dialogues of *East Wing West Wing 8: West Kowloon Dragon Balls* were in Cantonese, and the songs in Cantonese and English. All performances carried English and Chinese surtitles except for *East Wing West Wing 8*.



Figure 2. Stage reconstruction of the 860–880 Lake Shore Drive Apartments in Chicago by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in *Looking for Mies*, directed by Mathias Woo, produced by Zuni Icosahedron. Hong Kong Cultural Centre Grand Theatre, 30 September–2 October 2009. (Photo by Yvonne Chan; courtesy of Zuni Icosahedron)

architectural music theatre” (MAMT). When *Looking for Mies* premiered in 2002 Woo described this concept as a way of using the theatre stage/space to investigate different notions of architecture by integrating music, video, sound, digital technology, and installation (Zuni 2002). As he further elaborates in “Q&A DIY,” a self-interview printed in the *Corbu and Kahn* program:

Theatre is a very appropriate medium to discuss and explore architecture because, just like architecture, theatre itself is composed of and defined by space, light, and sound. Space has played a very important role in all the performances of Zuni, and there is always a sense of history and limitation in the space of every performance. (AIAF 2009d)

Woo contends that the essence of architecture has been distorted by the market and increasingly reduced to a matter of functionality, investment, and speculation, whereas public attention should be reverted to a “pure” concept of architecture as primarily a cultural-artistic endeavor. The same may be said of theatre, which today is also too often driven by economic rationales. He also believes that many of contemporary society’s conflicts

and anxieties originate in architectural spaces, since architecture, as a space and stage for social performance, significantly affects social structures and behaviors (Yang and Woo 2009:13).

Other contributors took the opportunity to draw analogies between theatre, architecture, and music. Beijing-based architect Zhu Xiaodi describes architecture as “a spatial art projecting new inner feelings in man; a time machine generating a sense of identification among men” (AIAF 2009c). This, too, may apply to the theatre stage. Further conceptual equivalences were highlighted by Steve Hui (aka Nerve), the AIAF music curator. “Music is organized sound. Architecture is arranged space,”

Hui states in his program note for *Architecture is... Discourse with Music*, citing Edgard Varèse (AIAF 2009b). “[The] horizontal lines and vertical chords of music echo the crossbeams and pillars in architecture. Partitions in architecture can be compared to the movements in music, both requiring compositional development” (2009b). And again, quoting Goethe: “Architecture is frozen music. Music is fluid architecture” (2009b). Moreover, all three disciplines— theatre, music, and architecture—share a concern for spatial organization, composition, measurement, variation, timing, rhythm, and balance.

Conceptually, the purpose and content of the AIAF can be said to rest on a set of dichotomies and dialectical polarities in conversation with one another. First, in addition to an element of aesthetic exploration and popular entertainment there seemed to be a distinct educational intention, in a sort of reappraisal of the classic Brechtian proposition of a theatre for pleasure and for instruction. Second, the performance program exposed a field of tension between local cultural traditions and modern(ist) expressions which, in turn, underscored an additional layer of conflict, one that is constantly played out in the social and aesthetic spaces of both mainland China and Hong Kong—namely, a dialect-

tics of conservation and demolition, remembrance and removal, cultural introspection and futuristic innovation. Further connections were established between the spiritual and the material(istic), man and machine, performance and ritual, theatre and techné. The talks and exhibitions were explicitly educational, and the performances also displayed fairly apparent pedagogical overtones. The AIAF did not only intend to experiment or entertain but also to engage viewers in a joint intellectual exercise, and expose the local public to new layers of knowledge, aesthetic approaches, and critical discourses. *A Tale of the Forbidden City* in particular and, to a lesser extent, the MAMT series did come across as staged lectures on architecture. The lecture format was turned into a performative tool.

Zhang Hong, author of *A Tale of the Forbidden City*, defines his play as a “theoretical exposition on architectural culture” through the classic form of kunqu (AIAF 2009f). The opera surveys the basic concepts of Chinese architecture—its aesthetics, forms, rituals, and geomantic symbolism—as the last emperor of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) Chongzhen takes a walk through the halls of the Forbidden City before committing suicide on the final day of his rule, while the capital is seized by rebel troops. Chongzhen (played by Shi Xiaomei) is accompanied on his last journey by the spirit of Kuai Xiang (played by Li Hongliang), the legendary architect from Suzhou who designed the Three Great Palaces of the Forbidden City. Plans and designs of various structures and buildings are morphed and projected onto a screen at the back of the stage to illustrate the architect’s description as the two explore the different sections of the imperial residence. Kuai’s words stand as a tribute and testament to the glories of China’s ancient civilization, but also as a reminder of the transience and fickleness of man vis-à-vis the timelessness and solidity of architecture. As the different sections of the palace are projected, the architect, through song and speech, reminds the forgetful emperor of the human suffering that was involved in the realization of this grand design—of all those that he wronged, and wrongly punished, of those he killed and persecuted, those he exiled, those he mis-

trusted, and those he trusted yet who betrayed him in his last hour. Their journey of memory and discovery functions as both a reminder of the significance of cultural inheritance and a meditation on historical responsibility. Perhaps in those days of early October when the 60th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China was just being celebrated with great fanfare on Tiananmen Square, right opposite the Forbidden City, this homage to China’s past grandeur may well have served for some as an unwitting reminder of the persistent power of Beijing’s present rule over the Chinese nation, and of course Hong Kong.

The native artistic legacy—both architectural (the imperial palaces) and performative (the acting and singing conventions of kunqu)—is transmitted and possibly made more appealing to contemporary audiences by sophisticated multimedia that enthrall the



Figure 3. Shi Xiaomei as Emperor Chongzhen and Li Hongliang as Kuai Xiang in *A Tale of the Forbidden City*, directed by Mathias Woo, libretto by Zhang Hong, produced by Zuni Icosahedron. Hong Kong Cultural Centre Studio Theatre, 8–11 October 2009. (Photo by Keith Sin; courtesy of Zuni Icosahedron)

viewers as they, too, embark on a journey of knowledge and discovery of China's past. Interweaving lights and sounds (live percussion, human voices, computer-generated effects) and elaborate projections of moving maps, digital graphs, and Chinese characters rolling onto movable screens—exploding and imploding, spiraling, twisting, disintegrating, multiplying, expanding and contracting—fill the bare stage to enhance the vocal and physical plasticity of the performers and the performative possibilities of architectural design. The virtual integrates and complements the live by erecting a mental construct on the characteristically bare stage of kunqu, in which all the components of the performance, including the setting and décor, traditionally are brought to life for the audience only through the actor's movement and voice.

The trope of traveling through China's architectural remains also informs *The Forbidden City*, again starring kunqu actor Shi Xiaomei in the role of the Emperor and popular singer-songwriter Anthony Wong in the role of a Swallow that flies over the imperial quarters on a voyage through time and space, from the dynastic era to present Beijing—the latter signified by the whistle of a train journeying from the past to the modern age. Wong's costume is quite literal with its black shiny feathers, and the Swallow functions in the play as both a character and a narrator—a medium for and catalyst of meaning. In Chinese traditional culture swallows stand for peace and good fortune but are also emblems of architecture, since they typically nest on roofs instead of in trees (Woo 2009). *The Forbidden City*, too, speaks of memory, cyclical time, and the vanity of power and human endeavor as it illustrates traditional philosophy, aesthetics, and ceremonials through modern theatrical devices. The piece comprises four scenes (Sky, Circle, Earth, and Square) plus a musical overture and a finale. Classic kunqu melodies, sung by Shi Xiaomei, alternate with contemporary songs composed by Wong and Yu Yat Yu and sung by Wong with accompanying recitation by Shi. The singing, the declamation, and the music—both prerecorded and live (a piano and the traditional kunqu accompaniment of percussions, winds, and strings)—merge with electronic sound-sampling and a kaleidoscope

of digital effects and visual technologies: morphing 3D plans of the Forbidden City, bird's-eye views of the imperial palaces, effects of snow and fireworks (i.e., yin and yang), projections of measurements and blueprints of the various gates, halls, and courtyards, of swallows flying across a red sky, and of digits evoking traditional numerology and geomancy. Changes in visuals reflect the varying emotional range conveyed by the lyrics and orchestration, and a number of stage effects are produced to reinforce the sung and spoken parts. When the Emperor speaks of “clouds of incense,” for instance, the auditorium is enveloped by smoke.

Woo sees little difference between lecturing and theatremaking. Often his pieces come across as staged essays—works that take the stage as a platform to explore specific disciplines from a theatrical and intellectual standpoint, such as history, politics, and religion or, as in this case, architecture. The persistence of instructional discourse in Woo's production underscores his concern for Hong Kong's increasing anti-intellectualism, lack of depth, and cultural homogenization: “In Hong Kong, people have a lot of phobia for culture” (Yang and Woo 2009:13). Although the perception of Hong Kong as a “cultural desert” is a deep-seated and yet inaccurate myth, there is indeed a discernible propensity among citizens to privilege commercial and globally oriented forms of entertainment over local intellectual discourses such as Zuni's. I have noticed on a number of occasions through conversations with critics and acquaintances—even the most educated and intellectually sophisticated—how “Zuni” has somehow become a synonym for “complex,” “difficult,” and “obscure” in Hong Kong. Such a penchant for facile entertainment is even more pronounced among the younger generations. Thus the real problem is not with the scarcity of artistic production or the alleged cultural void, but with gaps in reception. Hong Kong exhibits a vibrant theatre scene and a dynamic culture of criticism—cultural, social, and political. Yet, as Woo contends, “we now have a new form of human being [so] we need to find a new concept” for artistic development and dissemination (2009). The AIAF may be understood as one such attempt at seeking new modes of imparting knowledge and fostering aesthetic appreciation among the general pub-



Figure 4. Shi Xiaomei as the Emperor in *The Forbidden City*, directed by Mathias Woo, produced by Zuni Icosahedron. Hong Kong Cultural Centre Grand Theatre, 25–27 September 2009. (Photo by Keith Sin; courtesy of Zuni Icosahedron)

lic. Certainly, entertainment is also a factor and the AIAF program delivers it through stunning visuals, captivating sounds, and state-of-the-art multimedia. The witty banter, catchy karaoke-style tunes, and biting satire of local politics and social mores in *East Wing West Wing 8*, moreover, proved hilarious even to non-Cantonese speakers and treated audiences with a fair serving of intelligent entertainment.

With this Saturday Night Live-style comedy series Zuni has strived to develop a forum for civic education and public discussion of current affairs. The latest installment, *West Kowloon Dragon Balls*, aims at “unlocking the mystery of the total failure of land use planning in Hong Kong” and exposing the “sameness” and “hideousness” of the city’s architectural designs (AIAF 2009a:43), the lack of green spaces, the local government’s misuse of resources and subservience to Beijing, the absence of a truly democratic structure, the popular obsession with luxury brands and real estate, and the changing lifestyles (as well as growing economic power) of their “mainland cousins”—the PRC Chinese. Still, the burlesque style of the

production did not prevent Zuni from reminding their audiences of some defining moments in recent history. A video of the “Tank Man,” the anonymous individual who stood before the PLA (People’s Liberation Army) tanks on Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in spring 1989, was shown before the start of the performance as the spectators took their seats—a not-so-subtle hint of the group’s critical stance toward the central government and Hong Kong’s pro-China leadership. Towards the end, actor Dick Wong read an open “Letter to China” followed by an old Cantonese song evoking memories of the last decades of the 20th century, in a rather solemn closing that once again reminded those in attendance of historic occurrences (the 1989 demonstrations, the 1997 handover) that should not be forgotten.

Matinee performances for secondary schools, discounted student packages, and educational talks and exhibition tours were also arranged to attract younger audiences. The AIAF was widely advertised with banners along the main streets and posters at subway stations and stylish design stores such as the popular

G.O.D. (Goods of Desire). This type of marketing and the availability of English-language surtitles indicate an attempt to reach out to Hong Kong's large expatriate community.

If we now turn to the modern architects series and examine the ways in which it intersects with the operatic part of the program we can identify another key dichotomy. At the most basic level this may be simply described as a tension between tradition and modernity, or “East” and “West”—and yet one that is far subtler than these overused sets of opposites. These twin impulses themselves generate further dyads that are inherent to both the semantics and conceptual organization of the performances, such as contrasts between cultural nationalism and xenophilia, primitivism and futurism, abstract and concrete, minimalism and opulence, functionality and beauty, idealism and rationalism. The warmth of the wood, gold, and red of the imperial palaces and costumes, of the body of the actor confronts the coldness of the gray of steel and concrete, the absence of bodies, the impersonality of technology, the aloofness of the machine.

And yet again the negative poles of these oppositions are nuanced and often turned upon themselves, so that the skillful technical maneuvering takes on a metaphysical and lyrical feel. Overall, such dialectical identifications may be said to rest at the core of the whole practice of “Hongkongness,” namely the episteme of a postcolonial or, possibly, neocolonial metropolis that has comfortably married antiquity, religion, folklore, and old-fashioned superstition with pragmatism, overconsumption, and hyper-technologization.

More complex meanings than a simple dialectics of traditional and modern are unearthed by the association, on the one hand, of performances that extol the concrete (architecture) and intangible (kunqu) heritage of Chinese civilization and, on the other hand, of hyper-technological spectacles that do away with human presence almost completely and place machines center stage as protagonists. The former prompt an exercise in mnemonics and call for protection and preservation. They articulate a statement of presence that counters the sense of *déjà disparu*—of constantly being



Figure 5. Cedric Chan sports Le Corbusier-style spectacles in the first part of *Corbu and Kahn*, directed by Mathias Woo, produced by Zuni Icosahedron. Hong Kong Cultural Centre Studio Theatre, 16–18 October 2009. (Photo by Yvonne Chan; courtesy of Zuni Icosahedron)



on the verge of disappearance, if not already gone—which Ackbar Abbas (1997) has identified as the ontological marker of Hong Kong but also, one may further suggest, of the whole Chinese (trans)nation in times of disaggregation, displacement, and dramatic transformation. The fact that the two operas both deal with the largest extant wooden palatial structure in the world, one that has endured centuries of warfare and turmoil, denotes an obvious impulse at archaeological conservation. The same applies to the choice of one of China’s most ancient and sophisticated theatrical forms, kunqu, which almost vanished during the Cultural Revolution and is now listed by UNESCO as one of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Moreover, the fact that Kuai Xiang is a ghostly apparition and that the emperor is described as “a shadow” who can hear the voices of dead ancestors calling from the past also foregrounds an ontology of spectrality and disappearance. This may be a reason why Woo defines *A Tale of the Forbidden City* as a “kunqu with a sense of mission,” namely with the task—as well as responsibility—of cultural preservation (AIAF 2009f).

In contrast, *Corbu and Kahn* and *Looking for Mies* pay homage to Western modernist aesthetics, architectural minimalism, and the futuristic visions of the historical avantgarde by turning light, sound (music and spoken/recorded voice), and the architecture of the theatre itself (the backstage mechanics of bars, poles, boards, sticks, screens) into the main actors and agents of emotion. Woo again privileges an instructive and yet idiosyncratic approach to explore the legacy of three giants of modernist architecture—Le Corbusier (or, more affectionately, “Corbu”),

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Louis Kahn. He is not interested in stories and plots, nor in detailing the minutiae of these men’s personal lives, no matter how sensational (Kahn’s, especially),<sup>8</sup> but rather in recreating their thought, their “aura,” and their work on the stage. Van der Rohe’s classic motto “less is more” neatly applies to these productions, which are indeed complex but never overloaded. *Looking for Mies* has no actors except for a sort of presenter who comes onstage before the start of the performance to introduce himself (his real self, Zuni actor Dick Wong), the time (30 September 2009, 8:20 PM), the location (the Grand Theatre), the space (1,734 seats, a proscenium of 8x15x32 meters), the technical apparatus (Macbook Pro notebooks, a slide machine, a digital projector, a Steinway piano, a revolving stage, 68 hanging bars, 160 fishing lines), and to explain the workings of the spectacle that is about to unfold. The full text of this spoken preamble, titled “Good Evening, Ladies and Gentlemen” and authored by Woo, is printed on the plans that serve as the program.<sup>9</sup> Once Wong exits the stage, the stage itself becomes



Figure 6. Dick Wong introduces the multimedia performance of *Looking for Mies*, directed by Mathias Woo, produced by Zuni Icosahedron. Hong Kong Cultural Centre Grand Theatre, 30 September–2 October 2009. (Photo by Yvonne Chan; courtesy of Zuni Icosahedron)

8. See the documentary *My Architect: A Son’s Journey* (2003) by Kahn’s son Nathaniel, which provides a detailed picture of the architect’s private life, his families with three different women, and his sudden death in a public toilet at Pennsylvania Station in New York City.
9. The program consists of an A1-sized sheet (84x59cm) with a 1-100 scale drawing of the stage plan on one side and of the side elevation on the other. The preamble, the production credits, a biography of van der Rohe, and other related information are printed in English and Chinese next to the drawings on both sides. Each spectator was supplied with a copy at the entrance of the auditorium.

the actor. Machinery, matter, and (machine-generated) media become the key sources and propellers of action. Textual projections (“The medium is the message / The structure is the content / The image is the light / The sound is the function / The form is the emotion”) intersect with the live piano performance by Nerve of a Béla Bartók etude called “Little Universe.” A large blinking eye and, next, an ink-sketch of van der Rohe’s full silhouette appear on a screen, along with quotations from his writings and speeches—“I don’t want to be interesting, I want to be good”; “It is better to be good than to be original.” Original recordings of the architect’s voice are also relayed, among graphics and shapes that seem to be drawn on the stage by invisible hands with rulers made of light. Woo transfers Mies’s architectural theory of the “universal space” to the theatre: “the stage is itself a universal space, containing different combinations of sets, different combinations of lights, and different stories” (AIAF 2009e). The equation of the stage as a drawing board, or a 3D design environment, is fully accomplished when two steel frames are set on a rotating disk and the mechanical elements of the stage—the hanging bars, fishing lines, boards, and sticks of various dimensions—start going up and down at different speeds with synchronized lights and sounds to recreate the skeleton—Mies talked of “skin and bones” architecture—of the 860–880 Lake Shore Drive Apartments in Chicago.<sup>10</sup> The performance is thus created by the interaction of the various elements of the stage. The materialization of the structural grid of Mies’s iconic construction makes it transparent that the leading character is not the architect, but his architecture. The stage machinery is at once the origin and outcome of the piece, of the project and process enacted by its own performance. It is a sensory symphony of smoke and lights, a dance of music and matter in which the stagecraft becomes the performer and its cables, bars, and rods trace lines in the three-dimensional drawing space of the stage. The sources of light, too, are revealed as if to imply that theatre is nei-

ther magic nor mysticism but mechanics and machine, and the theatre house is an integrated organism whose elements are made to come alive in performance. The concept of the theatre as a “living machine” echoes the functional approaches of constructivism (in architecture) and biomechanics (in performance) of early 20th-century Soviet aesthetics, which Mies admired. It also recalls the theories of the second “absent” protagonist of the MAMT series, Le Corbusier, who was equally fascinated by “the beauty of machinery” and conceptualized architecture as “a machine for living” and a game “of forms assembled in the light” (Zuni 2005). He also talked of the “inflammations” and “rheumatisms” of buildings as if they were living beings, as we are told by an actor during the performance of *Corbu and Kahn*.

*Corbu and Kahn*, a merger of two earlier stand-alone pieces—*Corbu* (2005) and *The Life and Times of Louis I. Kahn* (2001 and 2007)—is also a multimedia montage of spoken monologue, vocal recording, video footage, photography, music (electronic and live piano concert), and lighting effects. In these, as in *Mies*, human presence is reduced to a bare minimum and the focus is not the men’s biographies but their buildings. Drawing tables and three-dimensional scale models take center stage. Though this time they are not in place of but alongside the actor, the human role is still tangential.<sup>11</sup> *Corbu and Kahn* features two actors, one for each part. Cedric Chan in/as Corbu, however, chiefly represents one organic element of the many components of the performance to interact with the inorganic and inanimate ones. The actor does not act, in fact. He is more of a narrator, a lecturer or, again, a presenter of the Swiss architect’s work than his actual incarnation. Except for a few projections of portraits and photographs, Corbu is only embodied, virtually, by his architectural projects, such as the minimalist Petite Maison (Villa Le Lac in Corseaux, Switzerland, built in 1923), which is illustrated in great detail by Chan’s instructional mono-

10. A video excerpt is available on YouTube at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzT0kvRyYK0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzT0kvRyYK0).

11. Video trailers are available on YouTube at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPhEFaZqtW0&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPhEFaZqtW0&feature=related) (*Corbu*), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eA3hu8Ty7V8&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eA3hu8Ty7V8&feature=related), and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHB0SSj-1k4&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHB0SSj-1k4&feature=related) (*Kahn*).

logue as well as through drawings, photos, and films. Here one can witness once more a tension between conservation and eradication, in this case of one of the essential elements of the theatre—the actor. Kunqu and all traditional forms of Chinese theatre take the actor as the fulcrum of the performance; the actor is in fact the performance—a total body on an empty stage. In contrast, the techno-futuristic productions of Woo’s architectural trilogy, despite revolving around the celebration and conservation of the memory of great human beings, tend instead to eradicate the human presence almost completely and replace the body with the machine, physiology with technology, presence with absence and disappearance, or appearance under a different, inanimate form. Still, Woo sees no contradiction in this interplay of technology and primitivism, so to speak, because when one operates “at the extremes”—and the two ends of the scale here are the purely mechanical and the purely physical—the extremes do eventually converge. In both cases one is faced with an extremely precise articulation, or mode of expression; hence “because you only have this one element you have to be very focused. [...] I think that because there is no machine, the human being does become the machine in traditional theatre” (Woo 2009). True to his belief, Woo has created both religious theatre with hyper-technology—as in the multimedia productions of *Huayanjing* (*Hua-Yen Sūtra*, 2007) and *Huayanjing zhi xin ru gong buashi* (*Hua-Yen Sūtra 2.0: Mind as a Skillful Painter*, 2008), both featuring Buddhist monks as performers—and technological theatre with a soul.

Khan, too, is brought to life in the second part of the performance predominantly by audiovisual means and stage props, including a complex construction model that combines his most representative designs—the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, India, the National Capital of Bangladesh in Dhaka, among others—into a single hypothetical structure. Unlike in the first version

of 2001, and unlike Mies and Corbu, Kahn is not physically absent nor is he only narrated, but is given a concrete embodiment onstage. Renowned screenwriter and media personality Kam Kwok Leung portrays Kahn with extreme verisimilitude and attention to detail. The hyperrealism of his impersonation—achieved through costume, makeup, and vocal manipulation—contrasts with the abstract minimalism of the set and the overall concept of the performance as well as, in more general terms, with the standard praxis of Zuni, who are “against acting” (i.e., realistic personifica-

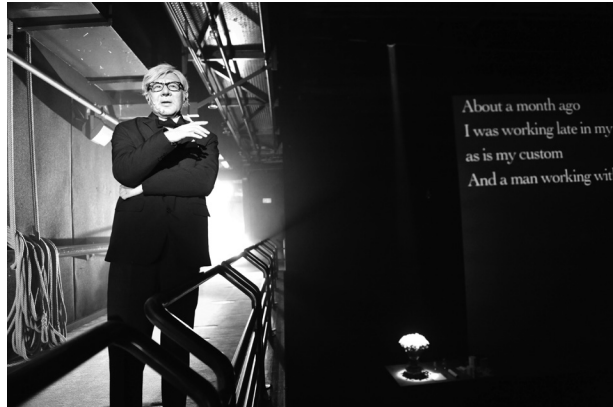


Figure 7. Kam Kwok Leung, on the raised stage balcony, impersonates Louis I. Kahn in the second part of Corbu and Kahn, directed by Mathias Woo, produced by Zuni Icosahedron. Hong Kong Cultural Centre Studio Theatre, 16–18 October 2009. (Photo by Yvonne Chan; courtesy of Zuni Icosahedron)

tion of characters). Kam wears a dark formal suit complete with pocket handkerchief and bow tie in the style of those that Khan used to wear (as evidenced by portraits shown during the performance), a grayish-white wig, a prosthetic nose, and a pair of thick, black-rimmed glasses that assist in reviving a mirror image of the man himself. Nonetheless Kam’s performance—his “playing” and “acting” Kahn—still requires quotation marks because in spite of his uncanny physical resemblance, perfect accent (the tone and inflection of his English are the same as Kahn’s), and star status, he is still not the real focus of the piece. He is more of a listener, an observer, and one of the various elements—alongside lighting, video, and sound—that piece together an impression of the visionary Estonian-born architect and

re-create his philosophy on the stage. Kam is little more than a medium and “recipient,” as it were, of the spirit of Kahn.

This spiritual element, which is very much grounded in the mystical tenor of many of Kahn’s own theories and speeches, brings out a shamanic side to the production, and also endows it with a very personal and human(istic) touch. The same applies to the other installations of the MAMT series, for they all display strongly evocative and somewhat idealistic qualities. A key iconic element in the set designs of both *Corbu and Kahn* and *Looking for Mies*, for instance, is a bouquet of flowers in a vase—red roses placed on the floor at the front of the stage for *Mies* and white ones resting on a drawing table at the back for *Kahn*. In both, the flowers stand as signs of reverence and remembrance, as offerings to the dead and symbolic catalysts of their spirits. The spirits of these past masters are summoned as well by an almost ceremonial repetition—aural, by recurring recorded speeches and synchronized electronic beats, and visual, through projections—of their famous mottos: “God is in the details” (Mies); “The making of a room is nothing short of a miracle” (Kahn).

As *Corbu and Kahn* comes to an end, the white flowers on the back table are flooded with beams of light and “switched on,” as if to signal the materialization of an imperceptible entity in a staged séance, while Kahn’s disembodied voice speaks of “the sense of wonder” and “the marvel of light” as the source of all being. “There is no such thing as architecture. There is the spirit of architecture. What is presented is the work of architecture. A man who does a work of architecture does it as an offering to the spirit of architecture,” Kahn tells us during the performance. And through these performances, the spirit of architecture lives on.

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