Asian Art and Performance Consortium (AAPC)

Theatre Academy Helsinki and Academy of Fine Arts

Shifting Dialogues : Asian Performance and Fine Arts

Background

In Finland, research on Asian visual and performing arts and cultural studies is still a relatively under-represented and under-funded area, and the number of scholars specializing in it is limited. The research has mostly been conducted in individual projects with strong links to scholars and artists working abroad. Yet there is an obvious need for Finland to face a transforming global financial and cultural economy that is now shifting its centre of gravity from West to East. Students from Asia, such as two of the four participating in this consortium, are beginning to arrive in Finnish academies and Finnish students are beginning to recognize the need to understand Asia as both a centre of contemporary culture and as the site of deep artistic traditions. As Asian and Western cultures come into increasingly close contact over the next decades, there will be mounting tensions, and a need to understand the roots of our cross-cultural relations. Understanding the ways in which each has stereotyped the other is important. And this understanding can be productively gained through the interface of artistic cultures.

The Asian Art and Performance Consortium (AAPC) is the first to bring together scholars based in Finland whose research is focused on Asian art forms, for the purpose of sharing ideas and methodologies, and establishing a foundation for future research. The synergy of research and knowledge represented in this project will contribute to a deeper understanding of Asian cultures in Finland and thus benefit students, performance practitioners, theorists, and the general public.

The researchers of the AAP Consortium have access to a vast network of practicing specialists and scholars in Asia, Europe and North America. This network will provide opportunities for students to train with a broad spectrum of Asian performance masters and visual artists, should they wish to deepen their understanding of particular methods and techniques, or explore the social and cultural contexts in which Asian performance and visual art takes place.

The geographical and cultural area of Asia is immense and diverse. In this project we are deliberately approaching it from different angles, incorporating the expertise of the individual researchers. ‘Asia’ in this project covers countries from East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia.

The project starts on January 1, 2011 and ends on December 31, 2014. The research of individual researchers and doctoral students will be conducted during the research period. The project will also include international symposia and workshops which will be open to students and staff of the respective institutions, international specialists and, partially, to general audience.

AAPC Researchers and Doctoral Students

Responsible Leader of the Shifting Dialogues -project and the whole AAP Consortium is Dr. Esa Kirkkopelto. He is also leading the Theatre Academy sub-project (named Subjects and Knowledge in Practice: Asian Performance). Dr. Esa Kirkkopelto is Vice-rector and Professor of Artistic Research at Theatre Academy. His research interests in AAPC are linked to ‘Actor’s Art in Modern Times’ project, which focused on Finnish theatre director Jouko Turka’s psycho-physical actor pedagogy at Theatre Academy in 1980s. The project aimed to clarify the social, aesthetic, and political impact of Turka’s pedagogical experiment, as well as to create new pedagogical tools for actor training. ‘Actor’s Art and Modern Times’ was funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation and completed at the end of 2010. This project evoked several questions that justify widening the perspective towards the Asian performance and training traditions.

Leader of and the only researcher in the Academy of Fine Arts sub-project (named Contesting the Cultural Ground: Space and Subjecthood in Asian Art) is Dr. Ray Langenbach, Affiliated Researcher, Finnish Academy of Fine
Dr. Stefan Kuzay, Docent of Sinology at University of Helsinki and a lecturer at the East Asian Department at University of Helsinki and at the Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration. Between 1990 and 2009, Dr. Kuzay has made several field trips to China to conduct research on the development of rural communities and their social and cultural life. He is also a theatre anthropologist, focusing on Chinese theatre forms. He has published his doctoral thesis (1993) and a number of articles and monographs pertaining to these areas. He will bring to the project first-hand knowledge of both tradition and current trends in performing arts in China thus contributing, for example, to the understanding of Brecht’s reading of Chinese theatre. Contemporary and past cultural flows between Chinese and Western theatre are strongly present in his research.

Dr. Jukka O. Miettinen holds a Doctorate in Dance Arts from Theatre Academy (2008) where he is currently an Affiliated Researcher. He is also a permanent visiting lecturer at Mahidol University in Bangkok, Thailand. He lectures on Southeast Asian theatre, dance and visual arts both in Thailand and in Finland and is a specialist in Southeast Asian dance forms, with broad knowledge of traditional dance and theatre throughout Asia. Dr. Miettinen has lectured on these topics since 1980s and has published books and web-based course material which is widely used at the Finnish universities. This material forms the core of an online book *Asian Traditional Theatre and Dance* (published by Theatre Academy Helsinki in 2010 [www.teak.fi/asian](http://www.teak.fi/asian)). His monograph *Classical Dance and Theatre in South-East Asia* was published by Oxford University Press in 1992 and his *Dance Images in Temples of Mainland Southeast Asia* in 2008 (by Acta Scenica). Dr. Miettinen has curated several exhibitions on Asian visual and performing arts. He is also a dance critic writing regularly for major newspapers and periodicals, as well as the Artistic Director of the annual Asia in Helsinki Festival, which, for more than ten years has brought Asian traditional theatre and dance to Finland.

Dr. Anna Thuring (former Kurkinen) has a Ph.D. in Theatre Research from University of Helsinki (2000) and is currently an Affiliated Researcher at Theatre Academy. In her research, she specializes in the Western physical theatre tradition, intercultural flows between Asian and Western theatre, dance and training. An expert in Japanese theatre, her Ph.D. dissertation, *The Spectre of the Orient. Modern French Mime and Traditional Japanese Theatre in the 1930s* (2000) comprises these areas. She has published several articles on Japanese theatre. In her methodology, she fuses practical training—from both her own experiences and observation and interviews of professional performers—and theoretical and historical approaches. Dr. Thuring lectures at several Finnish universities on both Eastern and Western performance traditions and their dialogue. She has also been involved in creating practical physical theatre courses which give an insight to the development and aesthetics of various training methods. The most recent of these is *Performing Bodies and Body-Mind Techniques* at Theatre Academy, co-convener with Dr. Kirkkopelto. She also supervises two doctoral projects in acting at Theatre Academy.

Ms. Maya Tängeberg-Grischin, MA in theatre and drama (Theatre Academy), a theatre director, mime performer and a physical theatre instructor with a degree from Jacques Lecoq’s school in Paris. Originally from Switzerland, she has worked as a director, performer and pedagogue in Germany, Sweden, Finland and India where she has studied and conducted research since the 1970s. In 2002, she founded her own four year physical theatre training programme at Novia University for Applied Sciences in Vaasa, Finland. The curriculum combines Western methods of physical training with Asian training techniques. The students of this programme have an opportunity to study one semester with local masters in Kerala, India or in Beijing, China.
Mr. Mikko Bredenberg, MA in theatre and drama (Theatre Academy), is an actor and theatre and drama educator. He is also a founding member of Teatteri Siperia, a professional theatre company based in Tampere.

Mr. Shoji Kato, MFA, is a doctoral candidate at the Academy of Fine Arts since 2007. He works with painting and photographic installations, with a synthesis of time and situation-based processes. His work has been exhibited at various venues internationally, including Triple Candie, New York, 2003, Sepia International, New York 2004 and Lönnström Art Museum, Rauma 2007, Galerie Anhava, Helsinki 2009 and in 2010, he participated Mäntään kuvataideviikot, Mänttä and ANTI-Festival, Kuopio, Finland. and ANTI-Festival, Kuopio, Finland. His works are in a number of public collections including Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki, Finland, Päivi Lipponen Trust, Finland. He received an artist fellowship from the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Japan in 2008 and a research grant from Alfred Kordelin Foundation, Finland in 2009.

Mr. Jay Koh, MFA, originates from South East Asia and since 1999 has been an EU citizen. He takes on multifaceted roles in order to negotiate with social-political structures on site and conceives of appropriate actions in response to local specificities and contexts. These actions emerge from an artistic practice that includes creating art works, curating and organising public art projects, exhibitions, colloquia, workshops and learning programmes. Recently these activities include evaluation of art activities and institutions, mediation of public art programme and performing the role of mentor in art support and development programs.

His practice and research, alone and sometimes in collaboration with Malaysian artist, Chu Yuan, are located at the interface of art and political/social life, involving artistic engagement with interest groups in diverse cultures. In the past these have included public participatory projects with Chinese immigrants and Travellers in Ireland, and with diverse groups in Finland, Mongolia, Malaysia, Poland, Thailand, and Burma (Myanmar). In Asia, Koh manages the "Open Academy", an open learning and resource development programme in Mongolia, Myanmar and Vietnam with local collaborators funded by Prince Claus Fund, Ford Foundation and Japan Foundation, among others. Koh has worked in Myanmar (Burma) as an artist-curator-educator since 1997. He set up and managed an independent art space, NICA from 2003 -05, after which NICA functioned as a library and coordinating office until 2007. During these years he established numerous contacts with the major artist and writer groups in Burmese society –intellectuals, activists, and local NGOs that work towards forming an open society through providing social and educational resources to the people there. After the Saffron Robe uprising in Sept. 2007 and cyclone Narqis on May 2008, he was commissioned by Prince Claus Fund, NL to conduct an evaluation on the damage to cultural heritage and practice as an outcome to the actions of the military regime and natural disaster.

Currently he is at the end phase of his doctoral studies with The Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, examining and articulating strategies and approaches within art practice that involves collaboration with, and/or participation of, public or interest groups. The output of this can serve to inform critical art practices, cultural policies, development of cultural resources, and public arts management. The study looks particularly at face-to-face communication strategies and interactive social performances. It aims at reducing uncertainty between the artist as cultural worker and strangers in everyday public and communal spaces, leading to deeper stages of relationships and moving towards sustainable collaboration. At the moment he is fulfilling his cultural diversity fellowship with Deveron Arts, Huntly and Peacock Visual Arts, Aberdeen with support from Creative Scotland.

Objectives

All research conducted in the AAP Consortium seeks to understand the present interest in the dialogue between East and West in its historical, political, religious, and ideological dimensions, toward the ends of developing a vision of the impact of globalisation on local culture, and fundamental changes to the notions of identity and personhood in the 21st Century. Historically, Western ‘Orientalist’ discourse has stereotyped Asian cultures antagonistically as ‘the Other’. As discussed in depth by Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, the Subaltern Studies Group and other theorists, the Orient was long constituted as the mirror image of European culture and Enlightenment values, and now remains, as Dr. Thuring, puts it, a ‘spectre’ in our relations with Asian societies.

Yet, what used to be separate social, economic networks and political alliances, coming out of the colonial and
post-colonial era are now interconnected and fused. While older disparities of culture and economy have not disappeared, Asia is now in a position of increasing economic and political global power, and old binaries of East versus West are being re-conceptualised.

Useful current global ‘multi-scape’ discourses, such as ‘cosmopolitanism’, ‘empire’ and ‘multitude’, come from such theorists as Arjun Appadurai, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, among many others. It is this nuanced and complex landscape of the 21st century that the AAP Consortium seeks to address. While most of us are studying cultural forms that are popularly referred to as ‘traditional’, our analyses are informed by current theory in Asian studies, visual studies and performance studies. Like many of our Western and Asian artist colleagues, such as Goenawan Mohamad, Ong Keng Sen, Philip Zarilli, Rustom Bharucha, Sumit Mandal, C.J. Wee Wan-ling, Farish Noor, and others, we are re-looking at the past in order to understand the present and to inform our own contemporary artistic practices.

Our goal is not only to bring Asia to the attention of the Finnish public, but to reflexively re-consider our ‘ways of looking’ into Asian art and performance forms as a kind of reverse-kaleidoscopic, through which to see ourselves and Europe as part of an inter-connected world of "ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes" (Appadurai), that extend beyond the conventional views of nation states and regional alliances.

The AAP Consortium promulgates sustained study of two extensive interlocked fields of cultural activity: the visual arts and performing arts. The objective is to find serendipities and synergies between the fields, and between Asian art practices and European practices. Our over-riding concern is to help establish the cultural foundations of a self-critical and humanist global cosmopolitanism.

The Consortium will focus on the philosophical, and socio-cultural aspects of Asian visual art, theatre, dance and performance research in Finland, and the pedagogical transmission of these closely linked research fields. Attention will be directed toward the inter-relationships of psycho-physical practices in the performing arts: Kirkkapelto, Thuring, Tängeberg-Grischin, Bredenberg with parallel notions of the body/mind in the visual arts, for example, in temple sculpture iconography (Miettinen), Socialist Realist and nationalist aesthetics (Langenbach, Kuzay), environmental art (Kato), and the micro-spaces of political activism and daily life under extreme oppression (Koh).

The methods and techniques of Asian traditional performing arts and visual art have had a profound influence on Western and Eastern practitioners. This is particularly true in the field of psycho-physical training. The study of modernist and post-modernist Asian performance and visual art is particularly significant for the insights it provides into the contemporary Asian cultural and political context. The AAPC combines traditional academic research, innovative practice-based approaches, interactive symposia and workshops in Asian visual art, theatre, and dance.

The research is conducted in two Sub-projects and three main overlapping topic categories which are shared by both Sub-projects. The topic categories are:

1. Techniques, Applications and Training
2. Site-specificity, Localisation and Negotiating Transcultural Interventions
3. Documenting and Preserving Intercultural Knowledge

Asian performance and visual art traditions have been a consistent source of inspiration for both Western and Asian practitioners, theorists and historians. Many important questions emerge from the research initiatives of these three topic categories.

1. Techniques, Applications and Training
   * How –and from what cultural elements– are artworks, social interventions, and performances constructed?
   * What are the current dialogues between Asian and European visual art and performance traditions and practices?
   * How is globalization and commodification negotiated in these two fields (e.g. global performance festivals and conferences such as the International Federation of Theatre Research, Performance Studies international, and art Biennials, such as Venice and Shanghai, et al.)?
   * How are economic and military power negotiated by Western and Asian artists?

2. Site-specificity, Localisation and Negotiating Transcultural Intervention
Methodological, political, and ethical quick-sand of interculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and potential exploitation underlies the international traffic of performers and cultural artifacts, and continues to be hotly debated. All of these proposed projects involve some form of cultural intervention, transplantation, influence, and translation. It is an integral part of our projects to reflect on our own agency as researchers, and to theorise our respective interventions in Asian cultures, as well as those of other artists and researchers that have preceded us.

* How are forms appropriated (or possibly misappropriated)?
* Other questions factored into our research include the contested validity of translation and the transference of cultural heritage from one society to another – especially in the presence of military or economic disparities.

3. Documenting and Preserving Intercultural Knowledge

While documentation and mediation tends to spectacularise and reify performance and art traditions, and can lead to their decontextualisation and expropriation, documentation also preserves traditional and contemporary forms, and establishes a body of knowledge for future scholars and the local communities of practitioners. In the case of ephemeral art forms, or practices of daily life, documentation and preservation are of particular importance. The research under this topic will focus on the relationship of cultural artefacts to memory, discrimination, censorship and social agreements around memorialisation. We will also ask:

* What is the impact of media on art and performance works documented, and how does documentation change the meaning or reception of significant cultural artefacts?
* Can archival procedures and the archive be more productively designed as an active cultural construction, rather than assumed to function as a passive repository for technical recall or social memory?

The project combines traditional academic research with innovative practice-based approaches and pedagogy. Several members of the team are both practicing artists and academic scholars. In addition to the individual research projects and field work, we plan interactive symposia and workshops in the practice and theory of Asian theatre, dance and visual art. These events will take place at the Theatre Academy and the Academy of Fine Arts. They will benefit graduate and post-graduate students, including those not directly involved in the project.

In the symposia and workshops, the participating researchers and post-graduates will present the processes and results of their individual research projects. Visiting lecturers and other scholars who are not directly involved in this project will be invited to contribute to the discussion. The participating scholars will be available for discussions at the practical performance workshops in order to enhance the interaction between theoretical and practice-based approaches. It is also expected that this sharing of information will enrich their research, as well as providing access points for students and the public.

Research Methods and Research Material

Research methods include a multiplicity of practice-based, artistic research methods, historical, anthropological, socio-anthropological, iconographic and semiotic methodologies, informed by ideology, politics, the politics of aesthetics, gender, feminist, queer studies, post-colonial and intercultural studies. Research materials include verbal, auditory, and visual data collected in field work, and kinesthetic knowledge transmitted in the course of practical workshops.

Both the Academy of Fine Arts in 2004, and the Theatre Academy in 2007 have made a commitment to the promulgation of the newly emergent research paradigm of Artistic Research. While the various members of the AAPC apply a wide variety of methodologies to their respective research projects, such as those indicated above, the overall work of this Consortium is significantly inspired and informed by this new research paradigm.

The term ‘artistic research’ is understood as equivalent to the terms “practice-based research”, ”practice as research” and ”art as research” used elsewhere (See, for example, Henk Borgdorf, “The Debate on Research in the Arts”, Sensuous Knowledge, Focus on Artistic Research and Development, no. 02, Bergen National Academy of the Arts, Bergen 2006.)

The purpose of ‘artistic research’ is to develop research arising directly from the viewpoint of the artist and the
problems and needs posed by art. Differently from ‘art research’, artistic research, takes the value of art and artistic experience as a given register of human experience. The starting point is the assumption that nature, the world, reality and society can be studied from the point of view of art, its practices and techniques.

Artistic research starts from aesthetics and art rather than from science, but does not exclude scientific knowledge or theory. Quite the contrary, to be justified as research, –and specifically institutional research– artistic research engages with new theory that emerges from art practice, philosophy (especially aesthetics and theories of mind), literature, cultural studies and science (especially theories of perception and interpretation), as well as other already existing theories.

All research currently done at the Fine Arts Academy and the Theatre Academy is approached within the theoretical frame of artistic research individual, and collective research projects are expected to connect theory and artistic practice, in order to foster new knowledge and understanding.

**Individual Research Initiatives**

**Esa Kirkkopelto**

In his research project, Dr. Kirkkopelto will focus on the question of how Western Orientalism relates to the discourse on the difference between modern Occidentalism and the Antiquity (*Querelle des Anciens et Modernes*), which has dominated Western thought since the 18th Century. On the one hand, the Orient has signified excessive sensuality, opulence, harsh violence, despotism and disregard of individual values, while on the other hand, signifying self-negation, asceticism, mysticism, and deep spirituality. In both cases, Westerners understood this either fascinating or frightening, libidinal ‘Orient’ as an alternative way of existing, living, and understanding the relation between human beings and the universe. (We can talk about ‘ecstasy’ in all meanings of the word.) In short, the Oriental human being, as portrayed in Enlightenment discourse was not a self-conscious, individual subject formed by Christianity and the metaphysical thought of Antiquity. Yet, Oriental aesthetics was crucial for modern Western culture, which dreamed of a return to the ‘Oriental agenda’ of the transformation of man, and creating new citizenship and political systems.

It is worth mentioning that the idea of the other from Ancient Greece, promoted by the early German idealist writers as an antidote to French/Latin classicism, emphasized the *orientalism* of Antiquity. In the spirit of Rousseau, early Romantic poetry sought alternatives for the ideal form and conception of man promoted by Classicism. An alternative was found from this other way of existence which, paraphrasing Friedrich Schiller, can be called ‘naïve’. This existence is corporeal, more collective than individual, more immediate and often also a more dangerous way of existence, full of virtuosity, of which Homeric epic poetry is a perfect example. The late poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin and his work on the Antique tragedy represent the most articulated way to reveal the ‘Oriental element’ of Antiquity. In modernist language, ‘Orientalism’ signified a synthesis of Western sentimentality and an imagined Oriental naivism to which Schiller aspired. This synthesis is foundational to the notion of the ‘Aesthetic State’ which eventually would redeem the expectations and mistakes of the French revolution. Later, Orientalism, with slightly different hues, can be found in the thought of both Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. For Schopenhauer, it meant asceticism and self-negation. For Nietzsche, it was linked to the ideal of self-affirmative, non-reflective life.

Dr. Kirkkopelto’s intention is to study how this discourse, which had an undisputed influence on modernism in art and on the birth of the mass ideologies of the 20th Century, lives in theatrical modernism and post-modernism, especially in the idea of the modern actor, and in actor training. We know Stanislavsky’s interest in yoga techniques, as well as the interests of Eisenstein and Meyerhold in *nō* and *kabuki*. We are well aware of Artaud’s Indonesian influences and Brecht’s interest in Chinese culture. Grotowski was influenced by Indian psycho-physical techniques. Suzuki, Barba, Brook and Schechner can also be mentioned in this context. In Finnish theatre, Jouko Turkka’s psycho-physical actor training has clear connections to this tradition. Finally, the Soviet Avant-garde also spawned an ideological trajectory along with psycho-physical techniques that traveled with Brecht’s work to communist and socialist societies, including India, SE Asia, Indochina and China. This trajectory of influences links Kirkkopelto’s research with that of Kuzay and Langenbach, described below.

**Ray Langenbach**
During the past decade Dr. Langenbach has been engaged in comparative field work in the peripheries of Asia and the Baltic region on the still largely misunderstood globalised modernist movement of Socialist Realism. To date he has studied Socialist Realist works in national and private collections in Finland (Lenin Museum, Tampere, and in the works of Tom of Finland), Latvia, Estonia, Croatia, the former GDR, USA, Mexico, Russia, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Singapore. The view of this ‘other’ branch of globalised aesthetics is often missing from the discourses of modernism still dominated by the Paris-New York-Tokyo nexus. In 2004 he published a semiological analysis of the Singapore National Day Parade’s Social Realist aesthetics which was the first to open this area of aesthetic research in Singapore visual culture (Langenbach, R. 2006 “Garlands of Love: Socialist Realism in Singapore” in Eye of the Beholder Ed. John Clark. Melbourne: Wild Peony Press.)

Langenbach has also explored the cognitive and psychological foundations of Asian Socialist Realist aesthetics in an extended work of ficto-critical slipstream science fiction, that has been published three times: first as a paper for a science fiction conference, then as a peer reviewed article in an Australian Performance Studies e-journal, and most recently, reworked under the title, “The Naked Meme” for the first compilation of queer writings published in Malaysia. The text is a dense theoretical and psycho-analytic fiction. Its topic, the life and work of two Chinese cognitive scientists, describes the politics of Maoist self-criticism (sixiang gaungzuo), in revolutionary cadre units, in the context of the the aesthetics of the Ya’nan period of the Chinese revolution. It was this formative period of Chinese modernity that provided the aesthetic foundation for Chinese and South East Asian Socialist Realism.

Socialist Realist art, literature and performance appeared throughout the Soviet Union, Germany and Italy in the late 1920s and early 1930s, followed by other socialist (and autocratic one-party) states and regions. The premier icon of the style was initially the ubiquitous portraits of Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin, but the style was radically transformed as it crossed borders into other cultures. Socialist Realism refers not simply to particular art forms but to a total social programme in the service of a unified telos: including political organisation, bureaucracy, education, social engineering, regulatory apparatuses, the deployment of discipline and force, and the economies of cultural production/display/reception. In general, Socialist Realism signifies a particular kind of lived and performed relationship of artist-to-citizenry-to-state that includes a strong privileging of government desire and the often violent enforcement of that desire, with a correlative degree of complicity and acquiescence among artists.

The formal principles and ideology of Socialist Realism still infuse the aesthetics of the state and corporations in a number of socialist, post-socialist and capitalist nations of Asia and Eastern Europe, including China, Vietnam, Laos, North Korea, Myanmar, Singapore, with residual and ironical presence in many others. The Lenin Museum in Tampere and the presence of large collections of Soviet era art in the Baltic countries remain as testimony to the aesthetic, as do the many public monuments, paintings, and national rites throughout Asia.

The interplay of Socialist Realism with other influences is often complex and paradoxical, infusing with local and international influences. For example, in Singapore, official culture has been influenced by formal and semiotic aspects of Stalinist/Maoist Socialist Realism, conflated with pre-revolutionary Confucian notions of virtue, social and filial duty, alongside the Protestant values of personal industry, hygiene and sobriety.

The human body as metaphor and ideological apparatus is central to Socialist Realist aesthetics, and there is a strong relationship with the psycho-physical processes that arose from avant-garde art, theatre and film in the Soviet Union (Stanislavski, Meyerhold, and Eisenstein), and Ford and Taylor’s capitalist techniques of engineering of the worker’s body and repetitive movements on the factory production line (ubiquitous in Southern Chinese factories of today). In China and SE Asia, the public military or National Day parades, complete with mass martial arts, and dance displays, have become a site where psycho-physical practices conflate with nationalist spectacle. Visual culture and performance culture merge in Socialist Realist pomp, ceremony and aesthetics.

The attitude of local Asian governments toward Marxist and Leninist ideology, while now more relaxed, still holds great sensitivity, especially in Singapore where Lee Kuan Yew and the Peoples Action Party violently divested its own Socialist origins, incarcerating many of its own former cadres just before and after independence in 1965. This ‘leftist’ iconophilia/iconophobia is an important phenomenon, ripe for this contemporary re-evaluation. To date there are no competing studies on the same or similar topic in the theoretical and historical literature of this region. The proposed work will represent a new development in the theorisation of SE Asian cultural history.
Stefan Kuzay

Dr. Kuzay’s study deals with religious theatre and dance in present day Mainland China. As such it focuses on plays performed at religious festivals as well as dances that constitute a part of many religious rituals. Extensive field research on this topic was conducted between the years 1990 and 2006.

The local cultural and religious traditions of most Chinese provinces still show vivid traces of performances that go back to the beginnings of Chinese theatre in Song and Ming dynasty, while dance and ritual has its roots in religious activities of the first millennium B.C. The performances in particular of the early 1990s show a high grade of authenticity, preserving the tradition in a mostly unaltered form. Quite contrary, those from the period of political opening, in particular from the years between 1995 and 2005, show an increasing readiness to modify the tradition and to incorporate modern elements of dance and theatre. This development led in many parts of the country to entirely secular events, culminating in TV or stage shows, performed for visitors from other provinces and foreign tourists.

The research intends to analyze the cultural and socio-political mechanisms that create a trend to transform religious into secular theatre or religious rituals into performance events. In the frame of this project also the development of the economy in rural communities and its influence on traditional art and religion will be taken in account. Also the growing tendency that can be observed with political decision makers, to increase and enhance religious conformity on a national level will be a topic of investigation. Chinese scholars have in recent years provided considerable historical research and documentation on religious performance genres. Yet no attempt has been made up to now to discuss the current development of Chinese religious theatre and dance in the context of cultural politics and the state of religious liberty in the PR of China today.

A second line of research will deal with the development of Chinese opera in the third millennium, in particular performances of traditional opera broadcast in national Chinese TV programs. The new function that arias of Chinese opera performed in the context of karaoke, ‘sing star’ programs and similar entertainment will also be subject of this project. Tools and Methods: Comparative research in the history of Chinese opera, popular culture and the media.

Jukka O. Miettinen

The study seeks to analyse dance images, i.e. sculptures, reliefs and paintings, in Southeast Asia. It investigates the transformation of the dance images, their symbolic meaning, and further analyses what kind of information they thus convey about dance, its history, its forms and its role in the cultures of mainland Southeast Asia. Due to the tropical climate and frequent wars, textual evidence prior to the 14th century is rare in mainland Southeast Asia and thus the existing reliefs and paintings provide an incomparable store of information about different aspects of the culture of the period when the buildings were created, including dance.

Dance is a temporal and corporeal form of art, and prior to the era of film and video it existed only at the moment it was performed. Material artefacts and art works, however, continue their existence far beyond the moment of their creation. Therefore it is logical that dance images have been used as source material for dance research. This is especially true in the case of Southeast Asia and India, where dance images are found in considerable abundance. This is explained by local religions and belief systems, since in all of them dance has a much more prominent role compared, for example, with the tradition of predominantly Christian Europe.

The study forms a continuation for Ph.D. Thesis “Dance Images in Temples of Mainland Southeast Asia” (Acta Scenica, 2008) in which the focus was on dance images in the temple context in the regions of mainland Southeast Asia widening the scope to cover also Southeast Asia, i.e. Malaysia and Indonesia. An analysis method based on Dance Iconography will be applied also in the forthcoming study.

One of the basic paradoxes of dance iconography is the fact that the art of dance and that of image-making are fundamentally different in character. Dance is corporal, temporal, and kinetic, whereas images (at least during the periods discussed in my studies) are static. Several disciplines and sub-disciplines are inevitably involved in the analysis of dance images, the most obvious of them being art history and dance research. Art-historical analysis helps when one is dating an image and in determining its stylistic and iconographical features, while dance research
provides tools for analysing its postures, gestures and other dance-related elements.

Further study of dance images would be most effective if several scholars representing different disciplines and approaches were to share their expertise. In addition to art historians and dance researchers, for example, scholars who are familiar with the textual sources, experts in dance costuming, ornaments etc. and, above all, dancers and dance masters who are thoroughly familiar with their own traditions should be involved.

A practical obstacle to this kind of research has been that photographic documentation of historical dance images in mainland Southeast Asia has never been compiled. The records are scattered in various, mainly art-historical publications and museum catalogues that are not easily accessible to those doing dance research. Dr. Miettinen’s Ph.D. might be, at the moment, the only attempt to gather together a wide selection of this kind of photographic documentation from Southeast Asia in one publication. The forthcoming study will supply an even vaster photographic documentation as well as provide new analysis done by applying the Dance Iconographical Method. The information gained by this study will be made available for students and researchers in East and West in a book format. Additionally, new technologies naturally provide an opportunity to create a virtual data bank, easily and economically accessible to scholars in Asia and elsewhere. These scholars could add their own substantive contributions to this bank. As the images discussed in this study are the only source of information about the dance of the early periods of Southeast Asia, such a database could gradually accumulate new information and add deeper insight into this important subject. This research would, on a very practical level, contribute to the East-West dialogue by providing for researchers from different countries an arena for continuous communication as well as a gradually growing data bank open form for the to use and further expand.

Anna Thuring

The list of Asian-inspired Western theatre practitioners, theoreticians, and educators is long. In the beginning of 20th century Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Craig, Copeau, Suzanne Bing, Ruth St. Denis, Artaud, Claudel, Brecht, and Martha Graham tapped into various fragments of Asian traditions. During the second half of the century, Michel Saint-Denis, Eugenio Barba, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Ariadne Mnouchine, and Peter Zarilli were strongly influenced by them. It is fairly well documented what these Western artists took and used from the traditions that they admired. A less discussed question is what they chose to omit.

In the first decades of the 20th century, influences were based on more or less fragmented, secondary information, imaginary interpretations and frequent misunderstandings. During this time, Japan, Bali and to some extent, China were the most important sources of inspiration. However, from 1960s on there seems to be a clear shift to the more concretely appropriated Indian practices. Unlike in earlier decades of the century, inspiration has been sought directly on sites of performances, in traditional schools or with the help of local teachers. Even in this context, we need to face the question of choices and ethics of selection.

Another interesting angle in this dialogue is the contribution of those performing artists and teachers whose own roots are in Asian cultures. What elements have they appropriated from their own traditions and what Western ingredients have they adopted? An example is Suzuki Tadashi theatre and his training method, but also, for example, Ōta Shōgo’s and the butō practitioners’ work. More recent examples are Yoshi Oida, Sreenath Nair, and Ong Keng Sen’s Flying Circus Project. What are the dynamics of selection in their cases?

It seems clear that for both Eastern and Western theatre practitioners and pedagogues the most motivating factor for tapping into the Asian traditions has been to develop the art of the actor. But what is the ‘actor’ in this context? What kind of an actor is being created?

Orientalism with its multiple meanings is an obvious starting point for the analysis but it is interesting that other “othernesses” hidden in universalities are easily forgotten. In this research initiative, the appropriated training methods will also be looked at from gender and queer perspectives. In many training methods there are strong martial arts influences or emphasis on the grotesque extremes. For example, ‘samurai’ pops up in many methods and exercises (yet we rarely see ‘military maiden’ exercises). And why haven’t the equally demanding ‘softer’ techniques, such as the techniques of onnagata (female impersonation in kabuki) roles or those typical for Indian or Southeast Asian female dance forms found their way in the method packages? Onnagata is also one example of ‘cross-acting’ in Asian theatre forms. It is most interesting to study how traditions in which men play women,
women play men and/or in which both men’s and women’s roles are played by a single actor have been received, rejected and/or appreciated in both Eastern and Western performance and training traditions. Interesting openings to performance and reception analysis of these conventions have been done but analysis of their impact in training methodology is an unexplored field.

An illuminating case of the multiple cultural selection processes is the reception of the onnagata convention in the West after the authentic kabuki was finally brought to the Western viewers from 1960 on. The first visit took place in the USA in 1960. The first European visit was made in France in 1965. Kawatake, Toshio (The Reaction to the Overseas Performances of Kabuki, Maske und Kothurn 27/1, 1981) through his own experiences as the visiting companies’ literary advisor, reported on the performances, and the choices taken to make the theatre form accessible for the Western audiences, and its reception. It is particularly interesting that in London and Munich (visit in 1966) the organizers conducted a survey among the audience and one of the questions dealt specifically with the audience reaction to the onnagata. In later publications that deal with the 1960 US visit, one can take up Barbara E. Thornbury’s article in the Asian Theatre Journal (Fall 2008): America’s Kabuki-Japan, 1952-1960: Image Building, Myth Making, and Cultural Exchange.

A parallel path worth exploring is whether the avant-garde, Stalinist and post-Stalinist response to onnagata in the Soviet Union was similar to the response in other European countries and the US. How did Socialist Realist aesthetics relate to this convention? If Western Europe got it’s first exposures to full kabuki performances as late as 1965, the audiences in Soviet Union saw performances of Ichikawa Sadanji’s group already in 1928, and there was another kabuki visit to USSR at least in 1962. Between these visits, the Soviet audiences (and theatre professionals) saw performances by the famous Peking opera female impersonator, Mei Lan Fang. Suk-Young Kim has written a fascinating study on Mei’s publicity photos and their use in different countries and during different periods (From Imperial Concubine to Model Maoist: The photographic Metamorphosis of Mei Lanfang, Theatre Research International, March 2006). Links are possible between this research and that of Dr. Kirkkopelto and Langenbach.

Maya Tångeberg-Grischin

In her doctoral research, Maya Tångeberg-Grischin analyses the techniques and conventions of European pantomime (based on hand gesture language, facial and bodily expression) and compare them with their Indian counterpart, the techniques and conventions of the abhinaya of kūṭîyāṭṭaṃ.

With the death of Marcel Marceau, European pantomime lost its last stronghold. The techniques and conventions of European pantomime are scattered, and there is hardly any empirical knowledge of the art form left. The techniques and conventions of European pantomime have to be retrieved through the analysis of the most important treatises on physical expression and gesture language as the work of Quintilian, Bulwer, Lang, Engel, Jelgerhuis, Delsarte, Bacon and Aubert.

The analysis is based on empiric and theoretic knowledge of pantomime as well as of the abhinaya of kūṭîyāṭṭaṃ, kathakaḷi and bharatnāṭyaṃ. The Nāṭyaśāstra, the most important Indian treatise on Indian theatre art and aesthetics is the theoretic background for the analysis of hand gesture or mudra as well as of the concept of the bhāva-rasa method, to produce and to project emotion accompanying gesture language. The bhāva-rasa method is analysed and compared with contemporary neuroscience and contemporary European theatre techniques.

Beyond the diversities of pantomime and abhinaya, there is a universal gesture language, based on the human hand as a basic tool. The universality of this creative stage gesture language is analysed and connected to European pantomime.

Mikko Bredenberg

Bredenberg’s doctoral project focuses on the work of the stage actor creator - on his/her inner life. Psycho-physical acting is approached from both artistic performances and phenomenological research. The hypothesis is that, prior to a performance, “the stage” can be constructed inside the actor/performer. From his experience as an actor/performer, he describes an alternative conceptualization of contemporary performance work, based not on acting as representation, but as a work taking place in inner bodymind. In the acting method to be developed, the bodily felt sensations and mental pictures form the score of the performance. This phenomenon can be called “The
Inner Stage”.

The practice-based parts of this artistic research (i.e. the performances) take place in Teatteri Siperia, Tampere. Mikko Bredenberg is a founding member of this professional theatre group. Also the experiences of other actor/performers in Siperia theatre group will be considered.

The main tasks in the research are:
1) to describe on what kind of inner skills or techniques the work as ‘enactor/doer’ is based. How is aesthetic inner bodymind awakened through breathing and vocal exercises, combining both movement and voice. Own exercises to cultivate “The Inner Stage” are introduced.
2) to explore how mental pictures and bodily felt sensations form the score of the performance and how “The Inner Stage” takes place in the actor/performer’s bodymind. What is the relationship between physical and psychic – outer and inner – in this kind of conceptualization of actor/performer artistic work? The theoretical discussion builds mainly on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and on Phillip Zarrilli’s theory of psychophysical acting.
3) to create performance(s) and materialize how “The Inner Stage” is shared between performers and audience, or between one performer and audience. There are interesting unexplored parallels between this notion of the ‘inner stage’ and Kato’s ‘placeness’ in the public experience of Japanese garden design, as described below.

Shoji Kato

Shoji Kato’s “Landscape Utopia” research focuses on the sophisticated ancient tradition of garden design in Japan that holds a strong relationship to performance traditions and ritual acts. Kato’s research is significant for its inquiry into the manner in which social life and a sense of “place-ness” coalesces around artificial pond & geometric-sites in Kyoto-city, Japan, and the performatve effects of environmental design on the rituals of daily-life in public space, especially in Japanese urban environments. Kato applies a phenomenological approach in his research, which is divided into three stages, site analysis, symbolic analysis (how Utopian ideologies are related to the sites), and transformation of the documented data into a situation or a ‘meta-field’ installation that performatively produces for the audience a meta-phenomenological register of experience.

Landscape Utopia: Place and Forms is a project that grew from Kato’s previous art project, River: Place and Symbols, 2008 that investigated the relationships of place-ness with everyday symbolism in the city of Seoul, Korea. This new project will take a similar approach and will be based on a series of field studies of the various ponds in Kyoto. Kyoto preserves cultural traces from different time eras, i.e. grid street system, temples and gardens including ponds and geometric forms. The garden, in Japanese culture, often signifies projections of ideal form of nature or landscape. Gardens have been created and maintained for many centuries as status symbols and used for various purposes such as amusement and contemplations. The gardens can be seen as forms of art that reflect the culture’s aesthetics, values and belief systems.

Kato poses the question, What is ‘place-ness’? Japanese ba refers to a field, and ma to between-ness of events in time and space. So the garden is ba and distance, for example, between two stones is ma. Both terms are used to refer to the spatial arrangement (aesthetics and philosophical) not only in the gardens but also in performance forms, including martial arts. Placeness, then, provides the connection of various human acts to the land, and indicates the mental or cognitive processes embedded in the place through various artificial traces. Kyoto city is a prime example of a site for the investigation of place-ness. The gardens function as miniature utopian universes within the city, so they are designed to be self-contained as they are enclosed with walls. How are the forms and locations of the gardens related to the various utopian visions (thinking about different belief systems diachronically over the centuries), and to the social structures (thinking synchronically about the neighboring systems within the city)? Kato’s intention is to expose the phenomenological aspect of the artificial forms in the relation to their location.” As mentioned above, there are fascinating possible links with B

Kato plans to investigate the location, size and shapes of the forms citywide, in order to make a series of cultural analyses of the relationships between the symbolic forms and the locations of the ponds, and to study the relationships of utopian vision (ideology, imaginations and aesthetic) in relation to the public’s experience of the symbolic forms. He will then transform the documentation and other data into an art work or ‘meta-field’, enabling the viewers to locate the various forms in a single space.
Jay Koh

Koh’s research project, entitled “Performance value of citizens’ creative responses against suppression” will investigate the continued oppression of a group of Buddhist monks in Yangon, Burma. The research will look into how monks and Buddhist members of Burmese society create forms of social resistance against the suppressive rule imposed in Myanmar/Burma by the military regime. It will focus specifically on events that have been taking place in Burma after the Saffron Robe uprising in Sept. 2007 and the natural disaster, Narqis in May 2008. It will investigate the disruptions to, effect on and changes of Buddhist cultural practices following such events as outcome of state’s management and acts of suppressions. Koh will set up a research station in Yangon and collaborate with local participants from different disciplines (artists, cultural workers, monks and writers) to facilitate this project and will then use the knowledge, findings and material gathered from the research to develop and produce artwork and artistic models of intervention involving collective groups. The research station could be used as a platform for informal education, promotion of local research culture and facilitation of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Expected Research Results

The results of the Asian Performance Project will be manifested in the workshops and symposia, and at a final public conference, terminating the project. The AAPC, therefore, will make available to Finnish students and scholars a large body of information concerning Asian performance through the live transmission of psycho-physical techniques, the distribution of primary and secondary research texts, and public access to Asian performance through photography and film.

For Theatre Academy and the Academy of Fine Arts, AAPC- project Shifting Dialogues: Asian Performance and Fine Arts opens a new line of joint research which is closely connected to their respective missions for promoting practice-based, artistic research in visual arts and performance. After the expiration of this particular project, research on Asian performance and art will continue and deepen in other international projects and collaboration. The two academies, which have already been sharing post-graduate and graduate seminars, are looking to continue their interactions in the future, with other research collaborations. This Consortium is not only breaking new ground between Finnish culture toward Asian cultures, but between the Finnish academies themselves.