General objective

In recent years, performance artists from the region of East and Southeast Asia have been creating works that present and interrogate methods of Masking the body. These contemporary Mask and Masking strategies relate to their origin in ritual as well as traditional dance and theatre forms, yet challenge the symbolic value and belief systems that consider Masks semiotic signifiers of national identity and heritage. This thesis uses both performance analysis and interviews to explore the concepts and working methods of selected artists. Their performance practices will further be examined in how they relate to cultural policy and hold potential for a methodology of Inter-Asian transnational collaboration. Ultimately, the thesis aims for a theorisation of the contemporary Mask and Masking phenomena that interrogates the Masks’ mediating quality as accompanics of intercultural knowledge and exchange.

Methods

Using performance analysis and interviews with artists and curators as methods, the study shows how artists create contemporary practices that deconstruct, hybridise and re-stage, ‘re-translate’ Mask and Masking traditions that are, to most part, recognised as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO).

Their efforts result in intersections, juxtapositions and mediations, that can be approached with comparative strategy. Following what Taiwanese scholar Chen Kuan-hsing describes, when he asks to consider ‘Asia as a method’, the performances initially and primarily focus on the relationship of cultures within the Asian region and, progressively, on the relationship of these respective cultures to a global (Western) audience.

Aim: Theoretical conceptualisation of ‘Expanded Strategies of Masks and Maskings’

Artistic strategies of Masks and Masking open up questions of cultural iconographies and performative translations of their stereotypes, as a recurrence to symbolic hierarchies of meaning and literal relations of power. How then, do the Masks in contemporary performances, prove as counter-genealogical practices of communication, connection and contact? Despite traditional Masks, as staged by Pichet Klunchun, seemingly assert the representational logics of national communities, my analysis demonstrates how these assumptions are being playfully demounted by the artists. Their performative usage shows them being determined by hybridity and mediation rather than being put forward as visual statements of socio-political identity. Through the works of Xie Rong (Echo Morgan), Chen Tianzhou, Pichet Klunchun/Chen Wu-kang, and Zuni Icosahedron, the dissertation approaches Masks as contemporaries and their cultural relations as regional, focusing on Masks as aesthetic phenomena of exchange, transnational circulation and traceable connection.

The notion of cultural purity and originality, as it has been associated with many performing arts genres described as ‘traditional’, will be ‘uncovered’ as discursive construct. Instead I hope to foreground that traditional Masks, as staged by Pichet Klunchun, seemingly assert the representational logics of national communities, my analysis demonstrates how these assumptions are being playfully demounted by the artists. Their performative usage shows them being determined by hybridity and mediation rather than being put forward as visual statements of socio-political identity. Through the works of Xie Rong (Echo Morgan), Chen Tianzhou, Pichet Klunchun/Chen Wu-kang, and Zuni Icosahedron, the dissertation approaches Masks as contemporaries and their cultural relations as regional, focusing on Masks as aesthetic phenomena of exchange, transnational circulation and traceable connection.

Selected Bibliography