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## THIRST: Urban Spaces of Desire

by Evelyn Wan



Kate March. *THIRST*. Photo: Juan Jose Ramirez.

*It began with a thirst from within, the dry sensation in the palate, the throat and all the way deep into the body. Desire manifested in movement, and the body asserted itself as a force of desire. You watched intently at the moving bodies before you, unconsciously touching your throat and wondering why you felt thirsty too.*

There were five performers, women dressed in long black dresses and high heels, standing close to each other in the performance space, illuminated by minimal lighting. Audience members came through to find their seats alongside the walls of the gallery, barely a foot away from the performers. Some of them had to push their way through, brushing past the five women to find themselves seated on the stairs or mini-stools, uncomfortably close to the stranger

next to them. In their hands they held wine glasses, but the glasses were practically empty – only a mere trickle of champagne was poured into each one. About 30 audience members filled the space each night the piece was performed.

*THIRST*, staged seven times at Experimenta Gallery on Hollywood Road in February 2012, was a film and live performance event created by director Kate March, along with music composer Kaja Bjørntvedt, and performers Patricia Chiu, Muriel Hoffman, Giselle Liu, Jade Yung, and myself, Evelyn Wan. This article is intended as both a critical reflection on the piece, as well as an attempt to situate the practice of independent experimental dance theatre in the urban spaces of Hong Kong, the very city we live in.

*The thirst from within threatened to break through the boundaries of the body. Sounds of exasperation escaped from the throat. Heavy breathing accompanied violent thrashing movements. They reached out to you, begging for help. Like animals in captivity, there was no escape. Instinctively you leaned back, shying away from the performers' reach...*

*THIRST* is an improvised contemporary dance piece, starting out with performers creating movement phrases based on the physical feeling of thirst, largely centered on the mouth and throat area, and the deep-seatedness of this sensation was presented through movement centered on the hips. Audience members were intended to soon share the parched sensation as they held on to their almost-empty wine glasses. As the performance progressed, the desperation and the

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Kate March. *THIRST*. Photo: Juan Jose Ramírez.

struggle to find just something to drink by the performers intensified, and at one point, three of the performers broke away from the dance space in the center and went around pouring champagne into the wine glasses, and began to engage in various forms of interaction with audience members. Each and every performer chose to react differently to the theme – some fought with others to get their hands on drinks, others relinquished ability to fight and simply let thirst take over. Some intruded into the personal space of spectators robbing them of their champagne, others retreated into shells of their own, unable to combat the insatiable thirst.

In recent years, scholarship and creative endeavors in the areas of media and performance have turned to pay attention to not only visual presentation but recognition of the open possibilities of a multi-

sensory approach. In regular theatre performances where the audience sit in chairs staring at a far away stage, usually only the audio-visual senses are engaged. Cognitive reception or in simpler terms, the attempt to understand a performance, becomes largely reliant on a mode of objective symbolic representation. The spectator's subjective and full-bodied experience of the performance is reduced to a view from a critical distance where the body is completely absent. The ability of human bodies as receptors of sensations and feelings is sometimes left out in both the construction of a performance and in critical responses.

Site-specific and/or interactive performances, however, like *THIRST*, help spectators gain awareness over where they sit and how they are embedded in the performance, blurring the boundaries between performer and

spectator. It is thus important to bring bodily responses into the discussion and look at the physical experience of both performers and spectators.

In my personal experience of performing in *THIRST*, as the moment of realization came for spectators that they could indeed participate in the piece, many jumped at the opportunity. Very soon, they were pouring champagne over the performers, feeding them with the contents of their glasses, or patting them and holding them to hush their anguished cries for help. Many of the viewers expressed that their own sensation of thirst heightened throughout the performance and they found that they could not distance themselves from the performers. The enclosed space was almost claustrophobic and by participating, they could mitigate the tension in their own bodies of being uncomfortably

confronted by the closeness of the performers.

What may be particularly interesting about the choreography in *THIRST* may be how body parts usually not prominently featured were used. The theme immediately calls attention to the lips, an area perhaps not commonly explored in dance. Bright red lipstick accentuated the lips, clearly visible to the audience seated close. French surrealist writer Georges Bataille wrote on the connotations of violence in the mouth in *La Bouche (The Mouth)*, highlighting its carnal nature:

*“...On important occasions human life is still bestially concentrated in the mouth: fury makes men grind their teeth, terror and atrocious suffering transform the mouth into the organ of rending screams. On this subject it is easy to observe that the overwhelmed individual throws back his head while frenetically stretching his neck so that the mouth becomes, as far as possible, a prolongation of the spinal column, in other words, it assumes the position in normally occupies in the constitution of animals. As if explosive impulses were to spurt directly out of the body through the mouth, in the form of screams.”*

This bestial association can be traced in the performance as well, with movement vocabulary occurring specifically in the area of lips, mouth, and neck. In one moment of unison, all five performers knelt on the floor with arms behind them and threw their heads back as far as possible, letting their mouths open wide in a silent scream. Such an animalistic position rendered performers vulnerable in

exposing the full length of their body in a submissive position and this immediately resonated the sexual connotations of the piece as well. The mouth is indeed also charged with sexual energy as it is used for kissing; lusciousness and fullness of the lips are seen as indicators of beauty and sexual attraction. Performers played with these intersecting notions of bodily yearnings, and the shared embodiment of having experienced such desires may have helped connect audience members to the performers. For instance, one of the motifs included wiping the mouth, a very common gesture that everyone has tried before. The quotidian nature of the movement made it easily relatable for the audience, which was intended to contribute to their sensation of thirst.

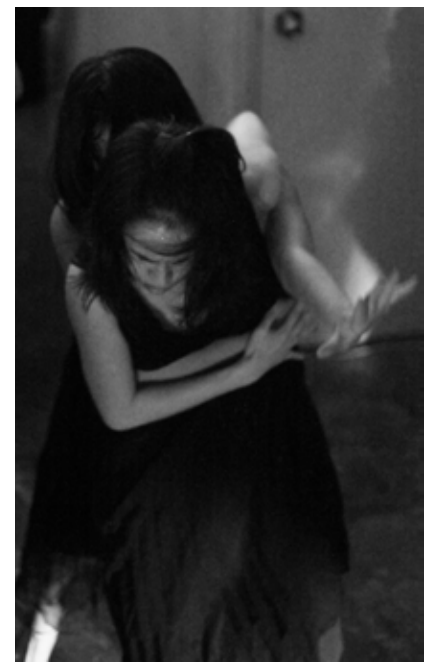
Performers moved beyond their roles as dancers and asserted their presence as desiring subjects. With regards to the notion of carnal desires in the piece, spectators could find resonance in the savagery expressed and brought

into the space. The performance space was transformed into a primitive location as the animalistic side of dancers was unveiled. Thirst and lust are both fundamental human physical experiences and movements improvised based on these sensations served to stimulate natural and basic instincts that we all share, with the intention of bringing about an affective multi-sensory experience in the audience.

*The thirst escalated into a desire to break through the cramped spaces of the gallery. Arms and legs scrambled to find the space for expression. They began to press onto your legs...They began to crawl onto your lap; you felt the warmth of their bodies and the sweat on their skin. With pleading eyes, they urged you to pour champagne down their throats...*

Hong Kong is a location filled with countless stimulations with its overwhelming number of billboards, light boxes, and sound and media

(Left and Right) Kate March. *THIRST*. Photo: Juan Jose Ramirez.



projections that we cannot escape even when sitting inside a bus or entering an MTR station. As city-dwellers, we are bombarded by sets of hyper-real sensations each day from outdoors to indoors (with TV and personal gadgets), rendering an encounter with a deep immersive and unmediated sensational experience such as *THIRST* rare.

Though growing in popularity in recent years through site-specific dances in public spaces, experimental dance theatre is perhaps less explored by local performance groups. It is intriguing to see the echoes between staging in an unconventional space such as Experimenta and the geography of the city. Located on Hollywood Road, Experimenta Gallery's entrance is in fact hidden in an alley off Mei Lun Street. A tiny space branching off the winding alleyways of SOHO district, the gallery is in itself representative of the difficulty of having a private space in the city – one can only afford such a limited private space in sprawling neighborhoods. Audience members almost had to engage in a hunt to find the hidden gallery. Incidentally this may be reminiscent of how performers need to seek out their own space to create and present work in Hong Kong.

Staging a piece right in the central business district is almost like establishing an artistic oasis in the midst of the concrete jungle of urban life. With the constant struggle over land space and land use, the performers' struggle to break through the claustrophobic space of the gallery may also be linked to the sensation of wishing to break free from the hustle and bustle of city life and cramped

spaces in Hong Kong.

In Ackbar Abbas' book *Hong Kong: Culture & Politics of Disappearance*, he succinctly points out that Hong Kongers live in a state of "proximity without intimacy" as we are physically close to other inhabitants of the city, but where we may not share an emotional affinity with them. In a city where we brush shoulders with countless individuals each day (desensitized to the feeling of touch), where we text instead of hug (desensitized to the need for human physical connection), it is indeed an alternative experience to come into a performance space and be approached, touched and/or seduced by strangers. *THIRST* is not only a multi-sensory performance on the level of bodily sensations but may also be experienced as a performance about our urban existence.

*The tension in the space slowly receded, dancers came to stillness, and the performance drew to an end after 80 minutes of intense bodily movement and interaction...but the*

Kate March. *THIRST*. Photo: Juan Jose Ramirez.



*imprint of the encounter remained. You distinctly recalled the intimate exchange of gazing into a performer's eye, the way she begged you to save her life with the alcohol concoction in your glass. You remembered the heaving in her chest, her breath so close to yours. How close can one get and how close is too close? Are you...thirsting for more? ■*