& I, the Moment of Being Dis-Stance Together:

Research into Online Performance Design for the Interplay between Intangible and Tangible Cultural Heritage

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1. Introduction

This article discusses the creative process of *& I, the Moments of Being Dis-Stance Together – Chapter of Generations* (2023), hereinafter referred to as *& I – Generations* (2023). This work, which received funding from the National Science and Technology Council, explores how the spatiality of *dis-stance* shows how the focus of theater-making has shifted to performance that mixes physical and virtual realms in this post-Covid-19 era.

The use of *dis-stance* is derived from Hubert Dreyfus's (1991) commentary on Heidegger's (1962) concept of '*Ent-fernung*' in *Being and Time*. Instead of denoting the abolishment of distance, *dis-stance* indicates the spatiality of moving wherein proximity constantly co-becomes with remoteness through dealing with things each day. With this understanding, this article suggests a rethinking: Theater need not be seen as a physical space in front of us but as a space that unfolds through the process of becoming accessible.

With the rise of online theatre due to the Covid-19 pandemic, theater practitioners were compelled to reconsider their existing methods of theater-making to create works that captivate an audience in front of digital screens. This article introduces the term *online performance design* to refer to this style of scenography that creates performance content for online theater. To elucidate this idea of online performance design, this article employs a practice-as-research methodological approach to scenography that is informed by practice as research (PaR) and incorporates the creative articulations process (CAP) proposed by Jane Bacon and Vida Midgelow (2014). PaR is a methodology that interweaves practice and theory rather than independently conducting practice or theoretical exploration. The

CAP framework helps to guide practitioner-researchers through six phases of PaR including: *opening*, *situating*, *delving*, *raising*, *anatomizing*, and *outwarding* (Bacon and Midgelow 2014, 7). Because I worked as this kind of practitioner-researcher to devise *& I – Generations* (2023), my analysis of the creative process will include both practical implementation and theoretical underpinnings.

The work *& I – Generations* (2023), held at the Taiwan Human Rights Museum, commemorates the political repression that took place during the White Terror period in Taiwan from 1949 to 1992 (National Human Rights Museum, n.d.). The museum is historically significant as a site of political imprisonment. Because the museum signifies unresolved events, it serves as the starting point for the devised storytelling of *& I – Generations* (2023).

I employed the museum to engage the audience/player in a role-playing game using a mobile app that involved moving through the venue so as to activate GPS waypoints that affected their gameplay. Each audience/player was given the role of an engineer tasked with addressing an unresolved issue in the fictional White Terror cold cases stored on their mobile phones. By moving through the venue, the audience/player had to collect information from eight different "energy spots" before they were granted a *qianshi* (籤詩), a specific poem or piece of advice corresponding to a Chinese character or a number inscribed on wood sticks used for fortune telling in Chinese temples (Lin 2023, 352), in the form of a digital picture. The gameplay relied on the audience/player's responses to the historical sites, to their avatars that are reincarnated at different points in the game, and to a fictional White Terror victim's recorded monologues.

These various inputs generated a performance that entangles physical and virtual realms and constitutes a "mixed reality performance," a term adopted from work by Steve Benford and Gabriella Giannachi (2011, 1-2). The term denotes the amalgamation of real/live performance with virtual/digital media to enhance interactivity between artistic creation and daily life. This article examines the creation of *& I – Generations* (2023) as an ontological exploration of distance that interrogates how an existential sense of proximity or remoteness yields a continual state of relocation that, in turn, affects spatial dynamics throughout the performance process.

2. *A Possible Shift from Performise to Online Performance Design*

For the scenographic exploration in this article, I began by employing the first phase of the CAP – *opening*. This involved developing a project

proposal and conducting design experiments to explore online performance design in *& I – Generations* (2023). I intended for the work to examine the concept of performativity in the context of digital technology. The term *performativity* was introduced by John Austin (1962) to refer to certain utterances, akin to declarations, that have the power to actualize the actions they express. For instance, when mailing a Christmas card overseas, placing the card into the slot for first-class mail in the mailbox is imperative for prompt delivery.

Building upon Austin's concept, Patrice Pavis (2013, 30-32, 303) introduced the term *performise* to emphasize performance-based spatial utilization and to enhance the characteristics of performativity in *mise en scène* after the 1970s. Consequently, scenography evolved beyond being a mere visual translation of the script on stage. Instead it turned to develop the dynamic constitution of performative encounters between the audience and the work. Interestingly, Dorita Hannah and Olav Harsløf (2008, 12) also draw on Austin's concept of performativity to explain the significance of performance design that creates a space for exploring and integrating "aesthetic, cultural and everyday experiences" within contemporary theater. This explanation implies that performance design often embraces nontraditional theater space venues to highlight the site-specificity of performance that is intertwined with our society, culture, and environment.

Different from performance design that typically aims to generate site-specific performance, *& I – Generations* (2023) focuses on the co-becoming process of physical and virtual realms within mixed reality performance. Because of this difference, the scenography for this work is more accurately termed *online* performance design rather than performance design to highlight an alternative trend that arose after the Covid-19 pandemic. The concept of performativity, as shown through various contemporary performances, increasingly reflects the mediating and agentive characteristics of digital technology itself and mirrors the technosocial structures of the post-human era (Leeker, Schipper, and Beyes 2017, 21-24).

In the conceptualization of and experimentation within *& I – Generations* (2023), the logic of *performise* is deliberately employed to emphasize the synergy of the audience/player's movement around the historical sites while using mobile phones and the internet to produce a two-way exploration between real life and the virtual game. This approach strengthened the audience/player's active participation in both the physical and virtual aspects of the performance.

The decision not to employ immersive virtual reality and virtual environment in *& I – Generations* (2023) was influenced by Harry Robert Wilson's

research on virtual-reality performance. Wilson suggests that it is precisely the incompleteness of the digital technologies used in performance that fosters uncertainty, enabling the audience to experience a certain "oscillation between intimacy and distance" (Wilson 2020, 8). The imperfection does not alienate but rather enhances the audience's connection to the work. I interpret this oscillation also as a digitally technologized form of *performise*.

Therefore, in *& I – Generations* (2023), to highlight the potential of this oscillation occurring where both the audience/player's corporeal bodies and avatars are actively present, I chose to engage the audience/player through a mobile gameplay app that was downloaded by them onto their GPS-equipped mobile phones. The gameplay required the audience/player to explore the real-world historical sites. As they moved around the site, based on their movement and proximity to pre-determined GPS waypoints, the app unlocked new content and interactions. Additionally, to enrich the mixed-reality performance, AI-generated depictions of the fictional victim and his family member were included to add depth and nuance. These technological choices heightened the audience/player's perception of the oscillation phenomenon and helped prevent the audience/player from excessively focusing on whether the technology is immersive enough or provides a sufficient sense of being present.

Through adopting this *performise* perspective, *& I – Generations* (2023) allows the audience/player, as well as physical performance elements (that is, the audience/player's bodies, the historical sites, and mobile phones) and virtual performance elements (that is, the internet, the audience/player avatars, and the fictional victim), to collectively reclaim a central role in the performance. This integration of the physical and virtual elements stimulates the audience/player to respond in ways that reflect mixed realities, imaginations, and memories.

3. Technology's Readiness-to-Hand

During the second *situation* phase of the CAP, I examined how the use of mobile phones and the internet can significantly influence our perception of distance, specifically in relation to whether the audience/player would be able to access the truths of the White Terror in *& I – Generations* (2023) through Heidegger's phenomenological concepts. However, this exploration was not without challenges. One challenge involved transforming Heidegger's complex theories into the gameplay for online performance design. According to Heidegger, things that are employed to reveal their

hidden truths should be labeled as "equipment" (Heidegger 1977, 288, 294-295). The act of employing things in the constitution of the world inherently establishes a purposeful connection from one item to another. Because of this interconnectedness, equipment possesses a quality Heidegger termed "readiness-to-hand," contrasting with things that exhibit "presence-at-hand" and exist as separate objects without interconnection (Ihde 2010, 44-45).

In my view, the Heideggerian concept of "readiness-to-hand" illuminates the performative use of digital technology in theater and performance works. The emerging notion of new media dramaturgy (NMD) can be understood as treating digital technologies within a production as key players (Eckersall, Grehan, and Scheer 2017, 3). NMD principles emphasize the materiality of such technologies, influencing their integration into the work, their performance therein, and their interaction with the audience (Eckersall, Grehan, and Scheer 2017, 3). Applying the concept of NMD in the creation of *& I – Generations* (2023), I observed that the use of digital technology could enhance the audience/player's physical presence as performers, thereby directly connecting them to the dramaturgical structure in real-time interaction. This approach heightened the performativity of hybrid media and interfaces across various temporal and spatial dimensions of the performance.

To elucidate Heidegger's concept more fully through the lens of NMD, the audience/player in *& I – Generations* (2023) was assigned the task of resolving fictional White Terror cold cases stored on mobile phones. These exercises demonstrated how technology can transcend its utilitarian function to become a medium of artistic expression. Mobile phones and the internet facilitate knowledge acquisition through reflection and practice while also serving as a conduit to reveal hidden truths. By doing so, mobile phones and the internet assume the role of Heideggerian equipment characterized by ready-to-hand relationships with the audience/player.

Within this framework, the audience/player's understanding and construction of the world, which interweaves the physical with the virtual, depend upon using mobile phones and the internet. Each audience/player engaged in a range of question-and-answer sessions within the game to piece together the fictional White Terror victim's fragmented memories of imprisonment and to chart each audience/player's routes to explore the historical sites. The ready-to-hand characteristic of technology significantly shaped the distinctive narrative of *& I – Generations* (2023), as showcased through the integration of mobile phones, the internet, and the historical sites within a participatory artistic experience.

During the *delving* and *raising* phases of the CAP, the spatial structure of *& I – Generations* (2023) was explored. Through field research, our team discovered that the descendants of White Terror victims continued to search for unidentified bodies, hoping to locate their missing loved ones. Heidegger's (1962) concept of *Dasein*, or human existence, was crucial to transforming this search by descendants into a spatial exploration within *& I – Generations* (2023). This exploration illustrates that theater space can only be revealed through the act of moving toward the availability of things.

Heidegger (1962, 100) introduced the term *Dasein* to describe human beings who understand the world through their interaction with equipment and form a ready-to-hand relationship with them. *Dasein* represents an ongoing incomplete process that reflects potentialities inherent in existential awareness. As individuals come to understand their own existence, they generate their own ways of existence in the world, culminating in each individual's inseparable being-in-the-world (Chen 2017, 48). Without an individual's approach to using equipment, the world would cease to exist.

We can compare being-in-the-world to mixed-reality performance. When "entering the theater's mediated space and technological systems and being asked to act or respond, the audience's (participant's) bodies become a mysterious doubling […] to re-cast "performance'" (Chui 2023, 76). This suggests that through digital technology, the audience is no longer merely passive groups in an auditorium. Rather, audience members are increasingly engaged as individuals who respond to and even co-create the structure of the performance by improvisation.

As a result of this shift in the role of the audience, the performance in *& I – Generations* (2023) no longer focuses solely on observing the actions of others on stage. Instead, the work focuses on transforming the audience themselves into performers and players who witness their own ongoing performance. The audience/player's task of addressing the unsolved White Terror cold cases, which allude to the descendants' search for their dead relatives, constitutes the mixed reality they inhabit. In the gameplay, the audience/player was urged to uncover the forbidden truths that were previously unavailable, thereby mirroring the experience of the descendants seeking justice. Both parties, the audience/player in the gameplay, and the descendants in real life, continue to collect information to come as close as possible to the truths.

Hence, the audience/player can be seen as participating in co-constructing a mixed reality performance through the use of mobile phones and the

internet. The focus lies not on completing a mission but rather on unforeseen variables and the existential sense of incompleteness that reflects the nature of *Dasein*. The online performance design for *& I – Generations* (2023) employs mobile phones and the internet to create a spatial structure in which the audience/player forms a ready-to-hand relationship with equipment. This participation establishes a being-in-the-(mixed-reality-) world. In this sense, during the performance, the audience/player engaged in physical or virtual realms to reflect on multiple interpretations of the historical sites and the game.

4. Unfolding the Spatial Characteristic of Dis-Stance

During the *anatomizing* phase, I further examined Heidegger's (1962, 143) concept of *Ent-fernung* and Dreyfus's (1991, 130) interpretation of it as *dis-stance*. These concepts informed the organic unfolding of the storyline in *& I – Generations* (2023).

Heidegger's understanding of being and *Dasein* emphasizes active involvement in the world through available equipment. The spatial context of this involvement, as interpreted by Dreyfus (1991, 130), relates to Heidegger's concept of *Ent-fernung*. Heidegger appropriated the German word *Entfernung*, which generally means removal or distance, by hyphenating it to become '*Ent-fernung*' to expound upon his philosophical concepts. While a literal translation could be *de-severance,* implying the abolishing of distance, Dreyfus (1991, 130-131) proposes that Heidegger's use of *Ent-fernung* can be better understood as *dis-stance*. Here, *dis-stance* denotes *Dasein*'s dynamic process of either bringing things closer or distancing them in relation to its existence by incorporating them into its sphere of concern.

From my perspective, this means that if we view *stance* as the place where *Dasein* explores its existence in the world, then *dis-stance* can be seen as a formation of spatial structure that emerges from *Dasein*'s continuous movement toward the availability of things. Consequently, I suggest that the spatial structure of *dis-stance* can be characterized as a process of constant co-becoming among *Dasein*, the available things, and their shared world.

Drawing on the aforementioned concept of *dis-stance*, I devised that the audience/player in *& I – Generations* (2023) could reorganize the fragmented memories of the fictional White Terror victim to expand the performance narrative. The interactive nature of the game enables multiple storylines to unfold in two parts.

First, the audience/player was free to select responses to the questions posed by the fictional family member of the White Terror victim. Different choices would lead to different directions in the game's storyline. Moreover, I intentionally devised the storytelling to allow the audience/player to experience recurring scenarios with subtle variations across each cycle of reincarnation rather than encountering entirely new situations during each life. For example, when faced with the decision of whether to approach the fictional White Terror victim, selecting "yes" repeatedly would gradually enlarge an option at the bottom of the screen until it almost covered the entire mobile phone screen. The game's repetitive yet subtly varied encounters prompt the audience/player to recall similar experiences and reflect on their evolving understanding of reality. The audience/player's involvement in the game can be envisioned as opening spatial potential that fosters diverse approaches, allowing them to shift between proximity and remoteness.

Second, the audience/player had to visit the historical sites at the Taiwan Human Rights Museum to continue the game. Upon arrival, each selected a game folder that had been saved in the first part of the gameplay to access the next phase of the assignment. The GPS waypoints on-site were carefully selected and strategically placed to interact with the audience/player's movement, triggering dynamic adaptations of the emerging and evolving storyline. In this way, the GPS waypoints symbolize places that continually co-evolve in a mixed-reality context through the audience/player's diverse methods of engagement. As the audience/player explored the historical sites, each encountered GPS waypoints not only from the current gameplay session but also from previous audience/players. The audience/player's spatial and temporal expansion beyond original boundaries is what I mean by *dis-stance*, characterized by fluid and unpredictable spaces where the past and the present intertwine, enabling the audience/player to navigate and explore their shared mixed reality environment.

Furthermore, in *& I – Generations* (2023), the use of reincarnation in gameplay illustrates the spatial characteristic of *dis-stance*. When an audience/player triggered GPS waypoints from the past, each could transit to the paths taken by other audience/players in the game. The choices linked to past interactions offer reincarnation opportunities, enabling the audience/player to navigate to different virtual lifetimes of other audience/players. In this context, *dis-stance* can be regarded as the ongoing adjustment of the audience/player's engagement with the unsolved White Terror cold cases, shaped by the evolving focus and reflection on the things encountered at the historical sites.

By being reborn repeatedly as different avatars of an engineer, the audience/player's world transcends our conventional understanding of physical space as a static container. On the contrary, the audience/player's world embodies a process of co-becoming that allows the audience/player to perceive the proximity and remoteness of desired things in the world and to contemplate the authenticity of the resolved cold cases. In this work, the concept of *dis-stance* blurs boundaries without erasing them, allowing the audience/player to comprehend and experience the world from different perspectives as the audience/player varies in levels of concern and care for the unresolved issues of the cold cases that each must continually work on throughout the game.

5. Dynamic Equilibrium between Yonder and Here

In the final phase of the CAP, namely, *outwarding*, I explored the yin-yang principle from the *Book of Changes*, a seminal 3,000-year-old text that profoundly influenced Chinese philosophy and worldview, and how it relates to my concept of *dis-stance*. The exploration was conducted through formal performances and academic paper presentations of *& I – Generations* (2023).

To embody these concepts, I juxtaposed the concept of *dis-stance* with the yin and yang principle to elucidate their similarities. This comparison then informed revisions of the online performance design for *& I – Generations* (2023). According to the great appendix, *Xi-Ci*, "[t]he successive movement of the inactive [yin] and active [yang] operations constitutes what is called the course of things" (Legge 1899). This refers to the ceaseless interplay of diverse elements within yin and yang relationship (Chen 2017, 7). Similarly, the concept of *dis-stance*, as discussed previously, implies a dynamic coexistence of proximity and remoteness among individuals who are not spatially constrained. Both concepts emphasize the importance of active engagement with diverse things that are not subject to a restricted range or fixed position.

Furthermore, Heidegger spatializes the existence of *Dasein* by contrasting here with yonder stating: "*Dasein* must come back to its 'here' from this 'yonder'; and it comes back to its 'here' only in the way in which it interprets its concernful being-towards in terms of what is available yonder" (Heidegger 1962, 142). This *yonder* represents the world beyond *Dasein*'s current experience, while the *here* denotes the environment or context where *Dasein* interacts with available equipment. The oscillation between the yonder and the here implies a process of co-becoming within the

spatial framework of *dis-stance*. Similarly, the *Book of Changes* describes yin and yang – the two opposing yet mutually dependent forces whose inter- action gives rise to the transformations and balance of diverse things in the universe – as "the successive movement of the inactive and active operations constitutes what is called the course of things" (Legge 1899).

For these reasons, I hold that the concept of *dis-stance* shares similarities with the portrayal of the reciprocal transformation between yin and yang in the *Book of Changes*. Both concepts highlight the fluid interaction, and balance between yonder and here, elucidating how individuals actualize their existence through adaptation and adjustment to their surroundings.

Incorporating elements from the *Book of Changes* in *& I – Generations* (2023) allowed me to explore Chinese cultural traditions and their relevance to performative forms of online theater that emerged during the pandem- ic. This exploration was articulated through two approaches in the work. The first approach utilized a mobile phone map that displayed the immedi- ate vicinity of each audience/player. To reveal other parts of the map, the audience/player had to move or relocate. This design choice to not display a complete map at once had the effect of making the audience/player aware of the location within an unknown environment and focused attention on GPS waypoints when triggered. This fostered a greater affinity between the audience/player and the environment. The GPS waypoints guided the audience/player to each room of the historical sites, including the women's jail, men's jail, medical room, reception room, detention room, canteen, exercise yard, and laundry, allowing the audience/player to observe the historical material conditions while listening to the monologues of the fictional White Terror victim through earphones. The gradual unveiling of the map, coupled with the auditory experience of the recordings, fostered a sense of approaching unsolved White Terror cold cases.

However, these design choices also suggested an ambiguity in what actual- ly happened on the historical sites. Although the audience/player moved through the sites, traversing from yonder to here, the entire experience was characterized by a lack of certainty. The audience/player's movement through the sites serves to embody the interdependent connections among mobile phones, the White Terror cold cases, and the GPS waypoints. In other words, each audience/player's movement was a portrayal of the recip- rocal transformation between yin and yang, as each audience/player helped reveal the forbidden map.

The adaptations and adjustments that occur during gameplay are a manifestation of the interplay between physical and virtual realms. There

is a dynamic equilibrium between yonder and here that underscores the fluidity of space and narrative.

The second approach in *& I – Generations* (2023) involved interspersing transitions such as advertising the program information in the narrative, allowing the audience/player to experience the passage of real time through periods of waiting. The act of waiting was not merely a passive interval but served as an active mode of participation in the performance. By incorporating waiting into the online performance design, I challenged the notion that waiting prompts the audience/player to intentionally "do nothing" and instead incorporated waiting as a means to participate. Waiting can be thought of as a form of liminal space, a form of in-betweenness, where the audience/player is neither fully immersed in the game nor completely in reality. This liminality heightened the audience/player's awareness that physical presence at the historical sites was equally significant to the virtual presentation on the mobile-phone screens. As the audience/player navigated interwoven physical and virtual realms, each was encouraged to recognize that engagement extended beyond the immediate information provided by mobile phones and earphones. The audience/player experienced periods of waiting not as static or devoid of meaning, but rather as a reflective experience that attunes each audience/player to rich, unknown realms that exist beyond overtly available content.

Moreover, the integration of advertisements for *& I – Generations* (2023) during the wait period served to denote the potentiality embodied in the historical sites occupied by the audience/player. This approach informed the audience/player that each of them was not only watching the performance but was participating in and developing the program as it dynamically unfolded. By doing so, the design underscored how the act of waiting can provide room for the audience/player to maneuver and shift between yonder and here, thus allowing unrealized potentials and possibilities to emerge. Since the audience/player was unable to skip over a period of waiting for the advertisement, this potential "actionlessness" became a bridge to link physical and virtual realms. Like the portrayal of the reciprocal transformation between yin and yang, this potential "actionlessness" is no longer confined to a fixed location that is far from or near the audience/player.

6. Summary: The Potential Correlation between Spatiality of Dis-Stance and Online Performance Design

In summary, this article has employed the creative process of *&I – Generations* (2023) to explore the spatiality of *dis-stance* and its potential implications for

online performance design. It also draws parallels between *dis-stance* and yin-yang concepts. Theater development in the era after Covid-19 shows that theater can be regarded not only as a physical space but as a space that is opened through the process of moving toward availability. In *& I – Generations* (2023), the transformation between far and near (at-reach), which embodies spatial structure, manifests in the game through the use of mobile phones and the internet that trigger GPS waypoints on the historical sites to resolve the fictional White Terror cold cases. Through these interactions, the audience/player is free to choose among various options to form an understanding of the events that occurred. In doing so, each audience/player contributes to the mutual construction of the physical and virtual realms, blending proximity and remoteness, and create a shared space where both parties can coexist. This concept echoes the reciprocal transformation between yin and yang.

The transition between far and near embodies a space that can only be manifested when the audience/player moves through that very space. This spatial attribute of *dis-stance* aligns with the hybrid nature of online performance design, where the audience/player navigates a blend of physical and virtual spaces and engages with others through various media. The audience/player's involvement in shaping the performance imparts a sense of vitality as if the performance possesses a life of its own. The use of mobile phones and the internet, serving as implicit performative equipment imbued with the spatial characteristic of *dis-stance*, suggests that the *I* shared by the audience/player in *& I – Generations* (2023) can be seen as *the unfolding world at present*. As each audience/player's experiential paths intertwine by engaging in and searching for ways of living, a dynamic world oscillates between the physical and virtual domains.

Both *dis-stance* and online performance design have the capacity to produce a space of co-becoming that is simultaneously personal and communal. The game was deliberately planned to span the entire museum complex, requiring the audience/player to spend approximately sixty minutes collecting eight "energy spots." As audience/player members neared completion of the game under Taiwan's oppressive heat, some reported significant physical fatigue. However, as their game avatars in the virtual realm increased in energy levels, their sense of physical depletion paradoxically transformed into a feeling of exhilarating joy. This profound internal bodily sensation suggests an experience of (syn)esthetics, that is, a kind of imagination that "has the capacity to induce changes in somatic processes and disrupt the boundary between the real and the imaginary" (Machon 2013, 204).

The audience/player members experienced the interlocking between reality and virtuality, substantiating their deep engagement in the mixed-reality performance, and leaving a lasting imprint on their bodies and minds. In this context, our existence and interaction with our surroundings can be regarded as dynamic processes. We continuously engage with accessible things, and this shapes our existence in the world – that is, our co-becoming-in-the-mixed-reality-world – whether it is in proximity or at a distance.

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