



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

Art and Motion: Shen Yuan's Transcultural Aesthetics

Silvester, R. (2019). Art and Motion: Shen Yuan's Transcultural Aesthetics. *Modern Languages Open*, 2019(1), Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.232>

Published in:
Modern Languages Open

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

Publisher rights

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Open Access

This research has been made openly available by Queen's academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: <http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback>

ARTICLES – FRENCH AND FRANCOPHONE

Art and Motion: Shen Yuan's Transcultural Aesthetics

Rosalind Silvester

Queen's University Belfast, GB
r.silvester@qub.ac.uk

The study considers the Chinese-born artist Shen Yuan in the context of contemporary cultural production, particularly regarding debates about the mobility of people, objects and images, and investigates whether her installations incorporate the notion or action of movement at the levels of their functioning and/or reception. It is argued that Walter Moser's concept of "artmotion", as well as findings from recent mobility studies, are useful theories with which to explore this question. The transformational function of her installations is also examined in order to probe how the mobile, sensory and transitory aesthetic experiences felt by the viewer affect their perception and comprehension of objects in the world. An equal concern is how the viewer moves through or around the pieces, contributes to their meaning and thereby participates in wider discourses about Chinese traditions, politics and contemporary concerns. In addition, by considering how Shen's aesthetics are inspired by Chinese culture at the same time as drawing on the current, global art scene, it will be shown how the transcultural is at the heart of her artistic project and how it demands a constant negotiation between two parts of her self. Finally, the study proposes that mobility studies may be usefully applied to other contemporary artists in transit.

Contemporary cultural production, whether in the East or West, is undoubtedly affected, inspired and characterized by processes of globalization, especially regarding the displacement of individuals and the circulation of capital, commodities, images and ideologies.¹ Numerous societies reflect a 'liquid modernity', to translate a term from Bauman: they are streams carrying migrants through porous borders, often transported on the crest of modern technology and spilling out malleable identities. The world has become a place of 'super-modern' mobility where, paradoxically, as Marc Augé stated, 'l'on peut théoriquement tout faire sans bouger et où l'on bouge pourtant' (8). Interest in both physical and virtual mobility has spread through the humanities and social sciences since the late 1980s, producing what John Urry in *Mobilities* calls the 'mobility turn'. Globalization is, after all, 'a world of motion' (Inda and Rosaldo 6). While David Harvey has conceptualized globalization in terms of the

¹ Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo define 'globalization', in its simplest terms, as 'the intensification of global interconnectedness, suggesting a world full of movement and mixture, contact and linkages, and persistent cultural interaction and exchange' (4).

speeding up and spatial compression of economic and social processes, Anthony Giddens has conceived of it as 'time-space distanciation', the stretching of the influences and relations belonging to social life across time and space. Within anthropology, Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo have reflected on the cultural dynamics of globalization and pushed forward the prevailing debate by contesting its perceived consequences, namely cultural imperialism and the homogenization of the world. Theoretical frameworks proposed by, most notably, Tim Cresswell in geography, John Urry in sociology and Stephen Greenblatt in cultural studies, have sought to interconnect different forms of mobility in order to comprehend how this phenomenon is reshaping modern life. There are echoes of Urry's topology of forms of mobility in Greenblatt's manifesto, regarding the way in which the former's observations about 'the corporeal travel of people' and 'the physical movement of objects' (*Mobilities* 47) map onto the latter's discussion of 'literal' mobility and the 'conspicuous movement of peoples [and] objects' (Greenblatt 250). Urry puts forward the ideas of imaginative, virtual and communicative travel, which are also conveyed in Greenblatt's discussion about the movement of images, texts and ideas and 'the "contact zones" where cultural goods are exchanged' (250–1). Both scholars are interested in the mundane activities related to movement which are part of daily life at work and leisure (such as getting onto a bus and mounting a horse), in addition to large-scale displacements (like international travel and global trade). Indeed, Greenblatt goes on to place importance on the individuals and intermediaries who are involved in the movement of cultural goods – the 'mobilizers' – and considers them as being central to understanding mobility (251).

One such 'mobilizer', interested in both 'small' and 'large' mobile activities, is the subject of this study: Shen Yuan, an artist who has been acclaimed in the French art world since migrating to Paris in 1990.² She creates mainly installations,³ most of which combine contemporary western techniques with Chinese themes or iconography, inducing two-way flows between the global and the local. She has thus not only benefitted from the circulation of art practices and principles around the world, but has also contributed to it, making her one of Greenblatt's 'go-betweens' and putting the transcultural at the heart of her artistic project (251). Transcultural art is understood in this article, at a primary level, as the representation of two or more cultures in one artwork, following closely Fernando Ortiz's coining of the term 'transculturation' in 1940 to offer an alternative to the established 'acculturation' which described the interaction between cultures resulting in one culture being dominated by the other. His term placed greater emphasis on the complex *transmutations* of cultures and the possibility of both loss and gain for each, thus revealing the more realistic dynamics of colonial situations, such as that between the United States and Cuba. Ortiz's contention that cultural contact leads to the merging and convergence of influences means that, in terms of artistic production, elements from both cultures are present. This is reflected in the majority of Shen Yuan's artworks in which French and Chinese features coexist, though the ensuing study of the particular context of their production and reception will show a more complex conceptualization of transcultural art which goes beyond both Ortiz's definition and Mary Louise Pratt's use of the transcultural in her analysis of colonial encounters and her notion of

² Born in Xianyou, China, in 1959, Shen Yuan studied traditional Chinese painting at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts after the end of the Cultural Revolution, graduating in 1982. Her interest in avant-garde art grew in parallel to this formal education, and she participated in the Xiamen Dada group during the 1980s, becoming familiar with western art and its theories. Her husband, Huang Yong Ping, also an artist, moved to Paris with her.

³ In this article, I am using a general definition of installation art which considers it to be 'a broad term applied to a range of arts practice which involves the installation or configuration of objects in a space, where the totality of objects and space comprise the artwork' (Kelly 4).

the 'contact zones' in which cultural influence moves in two directions (1992).⁴ Transcultural art, in its elaborated acceptation in this study, is characterized as much by forces of tension and ambivalence as by reciprocity and the exchange of influences, which are all enacted along multiple orientations. It may represent lapses of communication and vulnerability of expression by showing, for example, 'untranslatable' elements which arise with new ways of speaking or thinking through materials or, conversely, it may allow several discourses to be heard in recognition of the views and voices of others and thus challenge dominant ideologies. While opening up new spaces and possibilities, the works may produce misinterpretations since they are difficult to categorize and their destabilizing tendency means that neat binaries (for instance, East and West) are disturbed. In short, transcultural art transgresses and its creators traverse the globe in both physical and aesthetic ways.

Such experiences of moving between locations, which transformed Shen Yuan's sense of what art produced by a Chinese artist could evoke, encapsulates the essence of the transnational. She has adopted a changed perspective on 'nation' and 'home', indeed the encounter with another place has helped to articulate this difference. This physical and ideological movement away from the limitations of territoriality and fixity towards a more subtle play between indigenous inflections and global influences reflects how, in practical terms, Shen Yuan mediates the realities of a specific society and the draw of wider impulses. Arjun Appadurai has noted China's 'active resistance to interactions with the Other' (27) and its censorship of artists and artworks deemed to be derivative of the West is well known. Several of Shen Yuan's installations refer to these restrictions by looking back to her beginnings and conveying her struggle to adapt to a new culture. In these, the viewer is able to detect the ethnicity of the artist while simultaneously forming an impression of a fertile 'strangeness', in the sense used by Kristeva. Other works of hers focus more on rebirth than return, securely located in the here and now and attesting to a global sensitivity. Additionally, other installations incorporate an element of social critique, still revolving around the self, but comprising an interrelational dimension, since the artist is in direct contact with society, country and history. In general, her works express the varied ways in which she is subject to influences beyond the places that she physically inhabits, and they give prominence to disjuncture from the realities of everyday life, leading to new imaginative territories. For Shen Yuan, the cultural associations of one place are not erased when leaving it as they linger on as a memory, a repertoire of art praxis which can be recalled at another place and time. This is the meaning of the transnational in her art: the transmission of visual information beginning and ending in diverse sites and moving in several directions.

Aside from three installations evoking her difficulties when learning the French language, to be discussed later, Shen Yuan rarely represents the challenges of the encounter between cultures. When she does, for instance in *La Route Paris-Luxembourg* (2005), her work is infused with a humorous social commentary on western views of the Chinese. For that piece, Shen covered her Opel car in polyester fabric, made to look like black leather, having taken off its tyres and doors, thus turning it into a stationary object resembling a purse, complete with Velcro fasteners. She explained in an interview that during a journey from Paris to Luxembourg to set up an exhibition, she had been stopped several times by customs officers who were certain that any Chinese person driving to the financial heart of Luxembourg

⁴ Other notable studies on transculturation in the Latin American context include: Spitta, 1995; Hernández, Millington and Borden, 2005; and Arrizón, 2006. Further interpretations of the term are centred on types of resistance to global modernization and neocolonial forces, as described in the works of Papastergiadis, 2000, Moreiras, 2001 and Millington 2007. For more specific studies on transculturation and contemporary francophone art, see, for example, Lionnet, 2006 (transnational feminism in film), Brebion, 2009 (memory in francophone Caribbean visual art), Shilton, 2013 (Franco-Maghrebi artwork) and Lee and Peterson, 2017 (Zao Wou-ki and global art).

could only be conducting illegal business, such as money laundering or opening a secret bank account.⁵ The installation demonstrates both acerbic wit and poignancy, inviting one interpretation based on racism and another juxtaposing cultural immobility and vehicular motility. This exception to Shen's usually uncritical stance towards her French context is similar to other Chinese artists in France – the art critic, curator and artist Baozhong Cui estimates that there have been more than one hundred Chinese artists living and creating in France since the year 2000⁶ – whose criticism is more likely to be directed at China, due to its strict censorship of artists, than at their country of adoption in which they find freedom of expression.⁷ Mostly though, their works are apolitical and cut across national boundaries. Like Shen, they demonstrate a preference for subject matter which is associated with the human and the universal rather than expressing 'geographically determined notions of self' (Pollack 146). They use their 'in between' perspective to perform identity in new and, sometimes, complicated ways and choose their palette from a globalized world, taking those elements from everyday life that are shared with other artists around the world. For example, Chen Tianzhou, an artist from Beijing, fused together religion and different aspects of popular culture in a performance, *ADAHA II*, at the Palais de Toyko, Paris, in June 2015 which made references to hedonism, Buddhism (the title denotes a Buddhist deity), South Park, raves, hip hop and Japanese Butoh dance. Wearing futuristic and androgynous costumes and make-up, the performers alternated between posing and moving while videos played on screens above, underneath and around them, with mottos shouted out in English and Latin. The piece neither identified with only one culture nor did it foreground the East-West encounter that is commonly represented by Chinese artists. For this type of art that transcends borders, 'we can't talk about Chinese art and foreign art', as Chen states (Pollack 199), so that the term 'post-passport' art may be more fitting.

As ascertained, mobility certainly lies at the heart of Shen's personal and artistic development, but is it at the centre of her works? Do her installations revolve around either the notion or the action of movement? Is mobility found at the levels of the functioning and/or reception of the artworks? More broadly, one of the main concerns of this study is to investigate the transformational function of Shen Yuan's installations, especially how the mobile, sensory and transitory aesthetic experiences felt by the viewer affect their perception and comprehension of objects in the world. There will be an accompanying focus on the shift from the viewer's static contemplation of an artwork to their actual movement through the piece and on how this shift involves a greater contribution from the viewer to the construction of the installation's meaning. We will look into the capacity of these installations to evoke, non-verbally, several possible discourses – about, for example, Chinese traditions, politics, contemporary concerns – and we will explore the ways in which viewers are included in such discourses. These key questions and areas of interest will be examined after considering the role of mobility in modern artistic practice in the West. This will help to situate Shen's installations in the historico-cultural context of their production, as well as bring to the fore some theories that may shed light on her creations.

⁵ This explanation is based on accounts in *Woxx*, 15 July 2005 (n.a.) and Romina Calò, 'Les tribulations d'une Chinoise à Luxembourg', *Land Kultur*, September 2005, n.p.

⁶ See the interview with Baozhong Cui at http://www.viaparis.net/accueil_fr/.

⁷ For these artists, China's own history of oppressing its people seems to outweigh the wrongs of France's imperialism since, unlike France's relationship with its former colonies, there is no lingering tension or legacy of antagonism or oppression that Shen's generation needs to express artistically, even though France went to war against China in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (the Second Opium war, 1856–60, the Sino-French war, 1884–85, the Eight-Nation Alliance, 1900–1901) and occupied various ports and one of the Shanghai concessions from the mid-1880s to the mid-1900s.

Mobility in Modern Art

While mobility studies in the humanities has come into its own over the last twenty or so years, a preoccupation with movement has been evident in artistic techniques and theories for much longer, from the late nineteenth century. An early manifestation appears in *L'esthétique du mouvement* (1889) by the philosopher Paul Souriau who sought to reveal the differences between movement and the perception of movement, firstly by exploring the physical and psychological pleasures produced by the movement of the human body, and secondly by considering the meaning of movement for an observer. His aim was to establish links between movement and aesthetics by venturing beyond the world of art to examine the biology of movement from both a physical and a psychological point of view.⁸ The direct application of mobility to the arts emerged when the Russian-born sculptor Naum Gabo used the term 'kinetic' in the title of his work *Kinetic Construction (Standing Wave)* (1919–20). Interested in the movement of materials in time and space, he produced a ground-breaking, motorized sculpture, comprised of a steel rod fixed to a small wooden base. Inside this was an electric motor which was activated by pressing a button. Rapid oscillations of the rod formed 'the illusion of a sinuously twisting, three-dimensional shape' (*Tate.org*). Another prominent artist of the 1920s and 1930s who was interested in kinetic works was Marcel Duchamp. His sculpture *Rotative plaques verre, optique de précision* (1920) deployed a motor to spin pieces of rectangular glass with painted circles on them. This created an optical illusion as the painted segments became closed concentric circles. He pursued the idea of spinning works over the next decade or so, designing a series of *Rotoreliefs* – spinning flat disks – which he captured in the film *Anémic Cinéma* (1926). A fellow artist of the time, the American Alexander Calder, also incorporated movement into his sculptures, made out of suspended, carefully balanced shapes that moved when touched or in air currents. They were popular by the time Duchamp visited Calder's studio in 1931 and the former suggested that they be called 'mobiles'. Calder agreed to use this new term in his upcoming show and the name became established more generally to denote hanging, moving objects. These two artists, as well as several other well-known artists of the time, participated in the exhibition, *Le mouvement*, held by the gallerist Denise René in Paris in 1955.⁹ It helped to popularize kinetic art, since all of the works included some kind of motion. The French scholar Frank Popper supported René's endeavour, as he too believed that optical movement could arise out of the links between science, technology, art and the environment, and he brought the discussion of kinetic art into the academic sphere with his books, *Origins and Development of Kinetic Art* (1968), *L'art cinétique* (1970) and *Art, Action and Participation* (1975). In the second of these works, Popper analyses the artistic representation of mobility in Impressionist paintings and then instances of actual movement in works of art from the 1950s and 1960s. His definition of kinetic art here encompasses both physical and virtual movement, whether involving machines, mobiles or projections – popular at the time of writing – or the active participation of the spectator who moves or witnesses movement in the artwork (*L'art cinétique* 90–1). Works of kinetic art and

⁸ After giving numerous examples, Souriau determined a set of general laws governing human mobility in everyday life (1–30). He then applied a scientific methodology, involving knowledge of biology, physics and philosophy, to his observations in order to discover the conditions that give rise to aesthetic value in movements (33–78). Souriau's work is undoubtedly historically important since it is one of the earliest authoritative analyses to be preoccupied primarily with movement, and it was the foundation of the philosopher's further reflections on the aesthetics of art formulated during the first decade of the twentieth century. Its framework of analysis is very broad, encompassing the human sciences, and its general principles aim to account for the aesthetics of movement in everyday life, rather than focusing exclusively on fine art.

⁹ Other notable participants were Nicolas Schöffer, Yacov Agam, Jean Tinguely, Otto Piene, Jean Arp, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Jesús Rafael Soto, Victor Vasarely, Marino di Teana, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Gregorio Vardanega, Pol Bury, Wen-Ying Tsai, Le Corbusier, Robert Delaunay, Nadir Afonso, Max Bill and Sonia Delaunay.

studies on the subject continued to be produced into the 1970s, but then the development of new technologies began to infiltrate artistic production. Popper, in *Art of the Electronic Age* (1993), identifies the roots of electronic art in kinetic and luminokinetic art, perceiving the experiments of the early twentieth century with light and movement as the beginning of a techno-aesthetic (12). However, after this brief historical introduction, his study barely touches on mobility, concentrating instead on analyses of artworks between the 1950s and early 1990s which depend, either in their creation or reception, on new technologies. His book, then, exemplifies the shift from mobility to technology in discussions about art. Given the fact that very few of Shen Yuan's installations incorporate technology and that she is not (yet) interested in ways to deploy digital media, Popper's later theories do not really help us to understand her artistic approach.¹⁰

While Popper replaces mobility with technology in his later studies, Walter Moser, at around the same time, maintains the importance of movement in contemporary aesthetics in his concept of 'artmotion'. At the foundation of Moser's analysis in 'La culture en transit: locomotion, médiamotion et artmotion' (2004) is the notion of cultural transfer, a potentially vast field of study which, Moser argues, needs to be limited to precise cultural artefacts and phenomena in order to allow an objective and empirical analysis of objects (26). The term 'culture en transit' denotes a complementary approach to cultural transfer since it combines an *external* point of view, through the configuration of three types of movement, with the *subjective* perspective of participants in cultural life. The latter involves a consideration of certain phenomena marking our daily lived experience, such as the frequency and extent of displacements, the effect of speed and acceleration on our lives, the power and efficiency afforded by various technological mediations, and the temporal ephemerality and instantaneousness resulting from all of these (27). The former features locomotion, mediamotion and artmotion as the units used to systematize the analysis and is a categorization inspired by Appadurai's organization of contemporary flows and movements into five different '-scapes', as Moser acknowledges. While Appadurai's employment of the suffix emphasizes the fluid, irregular shapes of these areas of study and their construction out of sets of shared perspectives, as the etymology of '-scape' suggests, Moser chooses to focus on the movements within and between these landscapes.¹¹ Rather than analysing the multiple, visible features of an object or phenomenon, Moser's use of '-motion' restricts observations to those conveying aspects of mobility, therefore placing the term at the centre of his theoretical framework. Locomotion denotes the physical displacement of human beings and its cultural impact on contemporary society. It concerns instances of migration, exile, resettlement and dislocation, whether freely chosen or enforced, which have traditionally informed the study of mobility. In another work, Moser adds that locomotion may also entail the transportation of physical objects and goods, as well as the circulation of ideas and values ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 4). Mediamotion refers to the range of movements facilitated by contemporary forms of media which give the individual access to images, sounds and sensations from elsewhere while s/he remains immobile, often in front of a screen.¹² Here, movement and the creation of distance are implied through the senses since the body is in contact with the world by means of 'une immédiateté esthétique' ('La culture

¹⁰ Electricity is used in *Paroles brèves* to work the hairdryers and in *Diverged Tongue* to inflate and deflate the plastic tongue, while audio technology reproduces environmental sounds in *Un matin du monde*. These works are discussed in more detail later in the article.

¹¹ For Appadurai, 'landscape' and its meaning of 'all the visible features of an area of land' is the word that gave rise to the other '-scapes', namely ethnoscape, mediascape, technoscape, finanscape and ideoscape (33). These terms 'stress different streams or flows along which cultural material may be seen to be moving across national boundaries' (45–6).

¹² In 'Analyser les mobilités culturelles', Moser specifies that these new forms of media are based on the digitization of data and gives the examples of digital photography and cinema, mobile telephones and computers. The

en transit' 28). Thirdly, artmotion designates artistic experiences that produce some kind of mobility as the spectator interacts with, or perceives, the work. Moser is primarily interested in art installations and performances, as opposed to paintings and other traditional images. These may incorporate technology or media, functioning as described above, though movement may also be achieved by foregrounding the temporariness of an unstable material, or by promoting movement in the audience when faced with an immobile object of art. In all cases, the work induces an aesthetic experience which is transitory in nature and therefore translates successfully 'l'être-en-transit' ('La culture en transit' 28).

It is worth noting here that there are certain parallels between Moser's tripartite conceptualization of mobility and Popper's description in *L'art cinétique* of 'les groupes des œuvres stables à effets optiques, celui des œuvres appelant le mouvement physique du spectateur, et enfin le groupe des œuvres elles-mêmes en mouvement' (90–1). Popper's description of the spectator being physically displaced as part of the artistic experience is akin to Moser's locomotion; the use of media to produce a sense of virtual displacement is the same as mediamotion; and movement within the artwork itself, involving either of the two aforementioned types of motion, evokes artmotion. The principles of kinetic art therefore seem to form the basis of Moser's 'culture en transit', though the latter does not demand that technology is integral to the artworks produced and his references to new media are in relation to how they contribute to the experience of mobility as the audience interacts with the work of art.

Walter Moser's 'Artmotion'

Since the majority of Shen Yuan's installations evoke movement as a theme, practice and/or as an intended response from the spectator, and that the essential characteristics of artmotion, articulated above, have much in common with aspects of her artistic project, as will be shown later, further discussion of Moser's concept is worthwhile. To start with, he notes that some of the new experiences and forms that art is now taking provide the audience with an aesthetic experience of today's global culture which aligns with the idea of culture on the move. Unlike the mass cultural phenomenon apparent in locomotion and mediamotion, artmotion does not operate on such a large scale, being restricted to visitors to museums and galleries of contemporary art, in other words, to '[un] cercle étroit de l'art' ('La culture en transit' 35). Notably, in his introduction to *Mobilités culturelles: regards croisés Brésil/Canada*, Moser concedes that art today is escaping from such traditional locations to embrace other platforms, yet he continues to circumscribe the experience of art by stating that it must include framing and staging, meaning that not everything is art ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 5). In this way, art is freed from its traditional parameters, since the current proliferation of installations and performances, often involving sophisticated technical devices or apparatus, have invested the domain with new formats. Performances, in particular, capture the dynamic aspect of mobility, with their reliance on processes and passages between different spaces and times. In regard to installations, the apparent stability and permanence of the works belie a complex relationship between material(s), physical form and spectator. Often the latter is encouraged to enter into contact, or interact, with the work, and it is this activity that confers an experience of movement. The spectator thus participates in some sort of transformation in order to fully realize the artistic experience. Moser expands on this 'acte de réception' to suggest that mobility may arise from apparently static artworks by taking into account the entire space containing them which requires navigation by the

internet is treated as a separate case since 'il s'agit d'une espèce de méta- ou hyper-média qui, grâce à la numérisation des données, peut prendre en charge et véhiculer les autres médias' (4).

visitor ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 10). Movement, then, is not necessarily inherent to the work, but may be constructed with the combined efforts of the artist and audience in the allotted space:

Si, au-delà de la contemplation statique des œuvres exposées, on élargit la visite au musée à l'expérience de la déambulation dans ses espaces, avec le *soundscape*, les luminosités changeantes et surtout les déplacements dans l'espace architectural qu'est le musée, on ajoute en fait de la mobilité où il ne semblait pas y en avoir dans la réception d'objets d'art apparemment statiques, comme des peintures. ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 11)

This suggests that artmotion may, in certain installations employing media, involve both locomotion and mediamotion. In fact, Moser provides a fuller description of the concretization of the concept of movement in artworks with the aid of certain devices 'dans lesquels convergent l'usage de l'espace, des apports purement techniques, des calculs artistiques, des éléments médiatiques et d'autres composantes' ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 8). In the case of Shen Yuan's installations, media technologies do not play a role, though the anticipated mobility of the visitor or the theme (or semantics) of displacement ensure that motion is central to the majority of her pieces.¹³ Moreover, she sometimes chooses to employ a material that is transformed during the course of the exhibition, highlighting the transition from one state, or shape, or size to another, caused by the passing of time. Instability and ephemerality, or in Moser's words 'une temporalité de la déchéance' ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 7), are therefore characteristics that reveal further correspondences with artmotion. Other features of artmotion are summarized at the end of his study of the installations at Inhotim Institute of Contemporary Art and Botanical Gardens, Brumadinho (Minas Gerais, Brazil), a 3000-acre park exhibiting contemporary art. These comprise the following:

1. Tout en thématissant la question de la mobilité, ces artistes ont recours à toutes les strates esthétiques de leur œuvre pour produire cet effet esthétique ;
2. Dans la plupart des cas, surtout quand il s'agit d'installations, le spectateur est invité à participer à l'œuvre, le plus souvent par son corps en déambulation. Celui-ci devient alors promeneur, matériau, voire co-créateur de l'œuvre ;
3. À travers ces traitements très variés, ayant recours à des stratégies esthétiques très différentes, le fait fondamental de la mobilité finit par être vu, senti, pensé et interrogé de multiples manières, qui sont susceptibles de mettre en relief la grande gamme de significations possibles qu'il peut assumer et véhiculer dans différents contextes possibles ;
4. En conséquence, aucune axiologie univoque de la mobilité ne ressort de ces traitements artistiques. Au contraire, toutes les axiologies simples, toutes les univocités sont remises en question, retournées contre elles-mêmes et rendues problématiques ;
5. Le travail de l'œuvre d'art sur la mobilité est marqué par un haut degré de complexité, par des ambivalences calculées et par une permanente invitation au récepteur de s'engager dans une activité critique à partir de son expérience esthétique. ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 28–9)

These commonalities will be borne in mind in the following sections of analysis of a number of Shen's installations to see, firstly, whether mobility is a determining factor in either their

¹³ Moser notes how the semantic content of a work's title, for instance, may invoke mobility ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 6).

form or their actualization – namely, the way in which the public engages with them. Do the commonalities found amongst the works in Moser's study hold true with respect to Shen's installations? How do Moser's conclusions complement findings from mobility studies and may they, together, usefully elucidate the representation and functioning of movement in Shen Yuan's installations? How are the artworks' intentions, meanings, values and aesthetic strategies understood in the light of this wider enquiry into contemporary cultural movement? By asking these questions we intend to establish whether and, if applicable, in what ways mobility acts as the heuristic centre of Shen's works.

Mobility and Migration

The installation *Perdre sa salive* (1994) offers a prime example of the impermanence and transformation of materials and images, inspired by a 'large' act of mobility, that of migration, and by the migrant's difficult experience of language acquisition. Created for Shen Yuan's first solo exhibition in Paris in 1994, it featured nine large, red tongues, formed out of ice and mounted on the walls of the Galerie kamel mennour.¹⁴ As time passed, the tongues melted, with their drips being caught in metal spittoons on the floor, revealing kitchen knives at their centre which were used as a practical means to keep the ice structures in place and became, gradually, a skeletal frame. Playing on the dual meaning of 'la langue', as the artist has confirmed, *Perdre sa salive* symbolizes the loss of one's native language and the inability to communicate in a newly adopted tongue, thus reflecting Shen Yuan's own inhibitions concerning the language barrier when she first settled in France (which she has discussed in interviews¹⁵). While comprising a threat to the migrant's sense of identity and hindering their integration, difficulties with speech also mark them out as different, other and therefore potentially menacing to the host society. The tongues/knives, after all, point outwards from the wall, towards the spectator who walks either in front of or around the artwork. Their protrusion, initially alluring and then dangerous, represents a visual 'otherness' which mounts a muted attack on processes of assimilation. The communicative function of this particular 'langue' may not always be effective, creating a language barrier, but Shen Yuan insists, in an interview with *Initiart Magazine*, that it is nonetheless important to continue attempts to communicate. She goes on to describe the absence of language as being similar to a soldier on a battlefield without a weapon who is 'fragile and unprotected', and evoked the Chinese proverb, 'he who loses his saliva is weak' to reinforce this idea (Ting). The knives, then, denote the possible exposure to danger – the inability to speak for oneself and to be understood – as well as the means to protect oneself, which were particular difficulties experienced by Shen.

The fragility of ice as a material is also evident, though its covert strength lies in its ability to repel since, being cold to the touch, it has an inherent defensive mechanism.¹⁶ Contrasting with the solidity of the knife's blade, ice changes its form as time passes, producing a visual language of resistance and diversity. Shen, by using this perishable material, relinquishes control over her artwork, since she cannot know for sure how the installation will look at any given point, nor how exactly it conveys temporality in the gallery space. As *Perdre sa salive* disintegrates, it raises questions, in a creative way, about what time and movement are, how

¹⁴ When exhibited later at the Galerie Beaumontpublic in 2005, *Perdre sa salive* consisted of seven tongues, and at Arnolfini in Bristol in 2001 four tongues were set on the sides of a square pillar.

¹⁵ See, for example, 'Shen Yuan: Just like a Fish in Water', 'Shen Yuan' and Ting.

¹⁶ The physicality of ice has been used by Shen Yuan elsewhere, during an exhibition at the Galerie kamel mennour in 2009, as an obstacle to block the entrance to a part of the show. To get access, visitors were obliged to wait several hours until they could complete their tour of the gallery. Coincidentally, Moser has written about Jana Sterbak's *Dissolution* (2001) which used chairs partially made out of ice that melted after a few hours ('La culture en transit' 35–6).

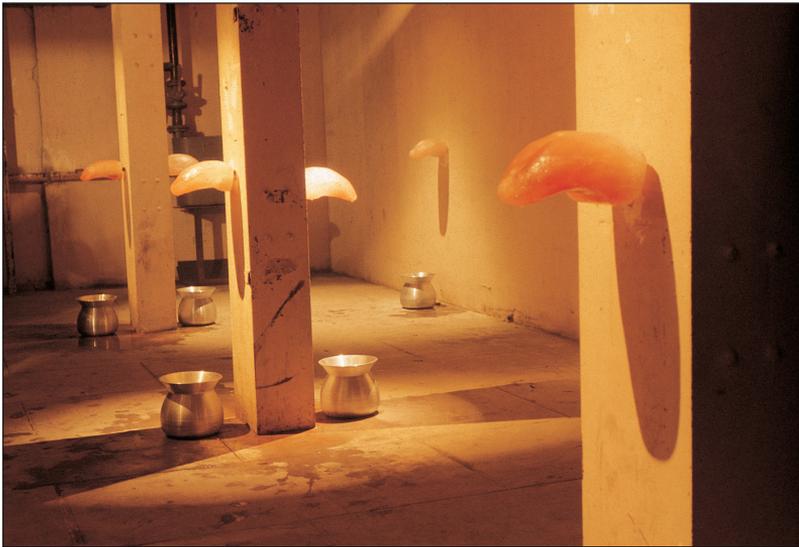


Figure 1: *Perdre sa salive* (1994, Galerie kamel mennour). © ADAGP Shen Yuan. Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris/London.

they intersect and how the spectator witnesses a dynamic act in a static piece through the transformation from solid to liquid, stability to dissolution.

The tongue recurs in her work as an inconspicuously threatening object, firstly in an inflatable form in *Diverged Tongue* (1999, Japan), using fabric and plastic that unfurl to a length of 12 metres from one corner of the room and reveal a forked tip. Since this happens unexpectedly, viewers may be caught in its unleashing, in a kind of physical assault. As the artist has stated, '[t]he tongue itself is offensive, just like language' (*Initiart Magazine*). A menacing playfulness is at work in this site of unvoiced language, with the split tongue standing for Shen's two languages, Mandarin and French, vying for both expression and space. Moreover, by almost replicating the shape and features of a snake, the tongue becomes a potentially harmful creature to the human visitor who nevertheless participates in the piece, through what Julie H. Reiss considers to be the basic demand that 'the viewer walk through the space and simply confront what is there. Objects may fall directly in the viewer's path or become evident only through exploration of a space' (xiii). *Diverged Tongue* is another example of how installation art utilizes its ephemeral nature to emphasize movement within a defined space and how components coexist and connect with their surroundings to produce meanings that continue to exist between enactments. The snake-shaped tongue is, moreover, a signifier of difference, a direct evocation of another type of being that has to find its place in society. This calls to mind Henri Lefebvre's observation that 'inasmuch as abstract space [of modernism and capital] tends towards homogeneity, towards the elimination of existing differences or peculiarities, a new space cannot be born (produced) unless it accentuates differences' (52). It is this creation of an intriguing and challenging space of difference in Shen's artwork that brings to the fore questions about identity and obstacles to belonging for the migrant subject.

Paroles brèves (2008, Paris) offers another manifestation of the tongue which involves a similar representation of otherness and, again, the viewer's participation in creating the work's meaning. In this installation, eighty hairdryers are suspended from the ceiling by their electric cords at different heights and switched on randomly and intermittently, causing the fabric tongues attached to dart downwards over the heads of the spectators passing



Figure 2: *Paroles brèves* (2008, Galerie kamel mennour). © ADAGP Shen Yuan. Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris/London.

underneath. Making a noise as they do so and then cutting out and rolling back up, they act like party poppers, supplying a light-heartedness which partially disguises the attack. By reappropriating these raucous, readymade objects, Shen Yuan alludes to the 'paroles brèves' which are barely heard before silence returns, as though communication (for the migrant) is fleeting, at best, or meaningless, at worst. They provide the missing vocabulary for the language of transnational art, a language that has become untranslatable since it has been turned into a collection of indecipherable noises arising out of incomprehension, powerlessness and loss. Where the referential is absent, the material takes its place: the plastic hairdryers and their fabric tongues occupy the space where communication should be.

These performances centred on the impossibility of speech deploy the ludic while at the same time conveying a more serious meaning: the loss of language is at the heart of Shen's experience of migration, thus becoming integral to her transcultural aesthetics. The works bring to life ideas, feelings and experiences by mobilizing material and symbolic forms to convey the transient, liminal and lost. For these effects to be felt, they depend on the spectators, whether in their movement around the gallery, their reactions to unforeseen actions or their witnessing of transformations. From their perspective, oversized tongues become offensive weapons, a piece of limp plastic swells into a recognizable form, domestic appliances squeal while attacking with soft tongues. Materials are chosen deliberately for their malleability and transformative potential, facilitating changes of shape, size and density, sometimes moving between solid and liquid, and sometimes using that most essential and abundant of materials – air – for dramatic effect. In line with Moser's description of artmotion, the spectator becomes acutely aware of the contingency and time-based nature of what they see or experience, and of the fragility or changeability of the material, resulting in marked differences between perceptual versions of the same object. Indeed, to echo the words of Moser, '[l]e choix du matériau peut donc introduire cette mobilité de l'œuvre par la voie de sa temporalité' ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 6). Being either temporally limited (*Perdre sa salive*) or intermittently performative (*Diverged Tongue* and *Paroles brèves*), the installations deploy ephemerality and passing time as means to complete and make sense of the artistic process.

Indeed, Shen's works are preoccupied with processes rather than final products which may dissolve or deflate into nothing.

Air performs another central function in *Trampoline 1 2 3 4 5* (2004 and 2009). Five inflatable mattresses (200 × 200 × 50 cm) represent the Chinese districts of Paris, London, Liverpool, San Francisco and New York and are set, roughly, in their geographical positions in the world, producing a pseudo-map on the floor. Each bed has a patchwork cover made out of traditional Chinese fabrics and the public are encouraged to bounce on these incarnations of Chinatown. Through the active engagement of the spectators, the installation challenges our acceptance of the idea of fixed material relationships and thereby transforms the exhibition space into a lively perceptual field. Shen Yuan has commented that '[l]'exposition est toujours un moment de sociabilité entre adultes, je voudrais inviter les enfants à y participer' (*histoire-immigration.fr*), which not only suggests that her art is for all generations, but also that it encourages unexpected associations between people as they move with each other, as well as raising awareness of what separates them.

With the possibility of jumping from one city to another, even from one continent to another, art in motion is truly realized, and emotions and affects become mobile in themselves as they arise between bodies. Ties between individuals become tighter as they move together, heightening connections and producing feelings of solidarity and belonging, without recourse to verbal communication. Even if bouncing happens at different rates, there is still unity in the mobile performances of the participants' bodies and an awareness of their shared experience of this artwork and emotions produced by it. *Trampoline 1 2 3 4 5* increases not only the participants' physical awareness of the movement of their body, but also their psychological and sensory experiences in the material world, thereby transforming their cognition and understanding of their presence in the world of phenomena. As well as being in touch with their own sensations while bouncing, participants are conscious of other performing bodies, which aids in building social relationships and collective identity. Research into the semiotics of rhythmical movement, for instance by McNeill (1995), De Landa (1997) and Gagen (2006), has shown how moving together in time, from tribal dance to military drills, serves to bind

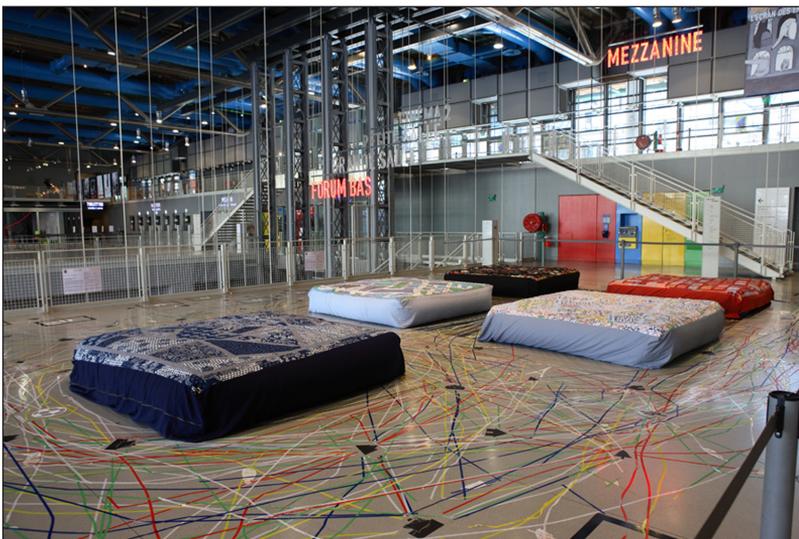


Figure 3: *Trampoline 1 2 3 4 5* (2009, Centre Pompidou, Paris). © ADAGP Shen Yuan. Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris/London.



Figure 4: *Trampoline 1 2 3 4 5* (2009, Centre Pompidou, Paris). © ADAGP Shen Yuan. Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris/London.

communities and provides a 'kinaesthetic undergirding' which is much stronger than ideology and discourse, according to McNeill (152). Bonds, then, are made between participants and extended to the various Chinatowns represented by the trampolines, as bodies leap to connect them and become different versions of those who followed migratory routes in the past. A more fluid understanding of the spectator's position is evident here, with Shen Yuan producing a visual and experiential language that not only develops a new consciousness in the participant about their environment and themselves, but also uses the metaphor of mapping to create a sense of community across continents and time. In this way, *Trampoline 1 2 3 4 5* offers a relational aesthetics, a type of art that, recalling Nicolas Bourriaud's observations concerning the art of the 1990s, depends on 'la sphère des interactions humaines et son contexte social, plus que l'affirmation d'un espace symbolique autonome et *privé*' (14). Claire Bishop discusses the work of two artists who exemplify this statement and proposes that 'relational art privileges intersubjective relations over detached opticality' ('Antagonism' 173). However, as part of her argument for a theory of relational antagonism, she does not agree with Bourriaud that the relations structuring relational aesthetics are intrinsically democratic as she rejects the 'ideal of subjectivity as whole and of community as immanent togetherness' ('Antagonism' 178). Where they find common ground is in the view that the relationship

between audience and artwork is central in such installations and, moreover, that meaning is created as a result of collective participation – a practice that is clearly demonstrated in the case of Shen Yuan's trampolines. Indeed, the piece gives concrete form to Bourriaud's belief, relating to Althusser's ideas about culture (1970), that works of art are social acts and produce positive human relationships.

In light of Moser's findings from his exploration of the installations at Inhotim, it is clear that Shen makes use of all the aesthetic layers of the aforementioned works to produce the effect of mobility, like the artists Moser investigated.¹⁷ They involve both the movement of objects within the installations and the transformative potential of materials to encourage or modulate the spectator's mobility. *Diverged Tongue* and *Paroles brèves* were conceived to draw visitors towards the inflatable objects and, in the case of the latter, to force them to negotiate between the moving, attacking tongues. Similarly, to appreciate and understand the meaning of *Perdre sa salive*, it is necessary to approach the melting tongues and see up close the drips and encased knives, while a large part of the significance of *Trampoline 1 2 3 4 5* is derived from the act of bouncing on the mattresses. In these examples, there is both physical mobility and the movement involved in the transformation of state when Shen 'change[s] something dead into something living, something useless into something useful' (*Initiart Magazine*). By breathing life into inanimate objects, such as a plastic tongue, party poppers or mattresses, she encourages art to be 'reborn in a new body' (*Initiart Magazine*). The readymade objects chosen – shoes, hairdryers, bed covers and fabrics – are directly connected to the everyday and, by deliberately selecting such familiar materials, she reduces the distance between artisan and artist, therefore emphasizing the idea that art may arise out of the mundanities of life. If her intention is to 'endow objects with a message' via an aesthetic strategy involving change (*Art Asia*), then she creates a visual language, a special type of tongue, which enables the communication of '[une] grande gamme de significations possibles' (Moser, 'Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 28). The materials, once transformed, reveal a language of their own which has been undetectable hitherto so that the art-objects function like linguistic items, constructing the grammar of Shen's corporeal world, comprising both western and Chinese inflections.

Seeing and Walking

According to Moser's second conclusion drawn from Inhotim, the spectator is invited to participate in the realization of the work itself, mostly through the act of walking. We have seen how this is effectuated in the examples immediately above. In addition, two other installations, *Pont* and *Uncomfortable shoes*, may be fully explored only by walking up to and around the artworks and associated spaces. They complement the ideas of sensory exploration and the communal movement of people that were discussed in relation to *Trampoline 1 2 3 4 5*. The title and form of *Pont*, recognizable as a bridge, immediately denotes mobility so that, as Moser has remarked, 'le contenu sémantique [...] contribue beaucoup à orienter notre attitude de réception' ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 6). However, its function and meaning are transformed since the viewer cannot walk on and across the bridge due to its construction, but is nevertheless actively engaged in the artwork by being encouraged to walk up to, by and around it, to contemplate and redefine it. It was set initially in the outside space of a forest in Vejer de la Frontera, Cadiz, Spain (2004) and then re-sited to a park in Marseilles (2013) and, in the same year, to the natural, though designed, environment of the Jardin des Tuileries, Paris. As the public go over the different terrains or pathways, they inevitably come across this artwork and are drawn to interact with it. Moser has commented on the experience of walking through a park with exhibitions scattered throughout, observing that such a

¹⁷ See the first conclusion in 'Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 28.



Figure 5: *Pont* (2013, Jardin des Tuileries, Paris). © ADAGP Shen Yuan. Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris/London.



Figure 6: *Pont* (2013, Jardin des Tuileries, Paris). © ADAGP Shen Yuan. Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris/London.

site encourages movement along multiple, transversal routes, combining to make 'un réseau rhizomatique' which contributes to a distinctive and positive aesthetic encounter ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 12).

Delicately patterned blue and white ceramics overlay steel tubes to create two ornate newels at each end of a short bridge whose bulbous balusters stretch across and rise up into a high arch. The large gaps between the slippery treads, the steep incline and the absence of one side of the construction mean that it is not a practical passageway, but more like an object to be viewed in the context of its surroundings. *Pont* encourages spectators to go beyond this object knowledge to attain subject experience, in relation, firstly, to how and from what position the artwork is seen and, secondly, regarding their participation in physical movement. When first installed in the forest in Cadiz, the porcelain-like bridge, almost a piece of sculpted *chinoiserie*, offered a striking contrast to the wild, parched, rural Spanish landscape and represented a meeting of East and West. It was still visually prominent when relocated to a park in Marseilles and then to the east end of the Jardin des Tuileries, with the archway framing the Luxor Obelisk in the far distance, incorporating a transcultural dimension in a different way.

The viewer acquires experience of negotiating the artwork, both visually and physically, and becomes 'an active agent in how the work (re)defines place' (Kelly 8). This entails not only the location of the viewer (in front, at the side, behind, etc.), but also the cultural space from which the installation is seen (Spain, France) and the transcultural space created when a Chinese-looking object is placed in European surroundings. Shen has thus thought about the 'creative viewing context' and the way in which new meaning and criticality may be established through recontextualizations (Teo 114). Far removed from the notion of artwork as an object in a gallery, *Pont* realizes its full potential and referential function by extending its reach, occupying thoroughly its space and connecting to its surroundings, while purposely creating incongruous cultural signifiers in order to bring together the viewer's aesthetico-cultural resources and the internal offerings of the installation. Its incitement to navigate public places demonstrates one of the key tenets of artmotion as it provides the viewer with an aesthetic experience that entails a mobile component ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 3–4).



Figure 7: *Pont* (2013, Marseilles). © ADAGP Shen Yuan. Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris/London.



Figure 8: *Pont* (2013, Jardin des Tuileries, Paris). © ADAGP Shen Yuan. Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris/London.

Installation art depends on such movements from one place to another, with pieces being constructed at a particular site and then reconstructed somewhere else at another time. In general, but especially when works comprise the creative output of migration, they rely on 'our centred presence in order then to subject us to an experience of decentring' (Bishop, *Installation Art* 130). The resulting sense of displacement of the work, viewer and/or artist is often conveyed through the re-siting of a cultural object, for example Shen Yuan's architecturally Chinese-style bridge appearing in European land- and city-scapes. Similarly, another of her installations, *Uncomfortable shoes* (2008, Paris), transforms the familiar into a transcultural object. It takes a recognizable symbol of Chinese tradition – the distinctive shoes worn by Chinese women in the twentieth century and earlier times – and turns it into a visual means of resistance against what it represented originally. A room in the Galerie kamel mennour displayed hundreds of these black shoes laid out to form the sentence 'Elles sont parties, pourtant elles n'ont nulle part où aller'. Two types of footwear were used by Shen, those which bound the feet of girls – a practice made popular during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) in the name of beauty and modesty, and which continued into the mid-twentieth century – and the black cotton shoes imposed on women labourers at the time of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). The former had the effect of confining girls to the home, so painful were the broken and distorted bones of bound feet, while the latter deprived women of individuality, personal choice and self-expression. The shoe-message, snaking up, down and across the gallery's walls and encroaching onto the floor in some places seems to go somewhere and nowhere at the same time, just like the Chinese women who failed to find a comfortable place in both traditional and Maoist societies. The position of the shoes reinforces the evocation of movement and exile contained in the message, either on a mass, migratory scale or in terms of a sense of personal estrangement conveying their lack of acceptance of the mores that prevailed. The significance of the shoes, then, depends on the coming together of two different historical contexts, with a third, contentious, meaning arising from their current configuration, suggesting that no single set of values emerges from this installation since simple or univocal meanings are challenged and problematized, in line with Moser's fourth

point in his 2011 study. Indeed, for him, the most 'intense' mobility arises from the spectator's act of reconceptualizing the work of art so that intellectual movement accompanies synchronously bodily movement ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 23).

As with *Pont*, Shen Yuan defamiliarizes the familiar in *Uncomfortable shoes*: she uses something traditional and recognizable to subvert its original usage, meaning and associations, producing something new and unexpected. The rational or functional understanding of these utilitarian objects is thus destabilized. Also like *Pont*, the spectators are engaged in joint ocular and perambulatory activity. In order to be able to read the full sentence, spectators' eyes, if not their whole body, must follow the words as they wind around the room. In practise, many spectators go up close to see the shoes in clearer detail and then trace their trajectory so that seeing and walking become intrinsically linked. Such a process involves an 'attentive' reading of the space, to borrow a term from Jenny Chamarette, which uses 'a whole body, not just the eyes' (353). The spectator is free to choose how to shape their own path through the work, to view it from the middle of the sentence if they wish, and so to engage performatively with the installation and with the actual, physical attributes of the gallery – its size, the dimensions and colour of the walls, the position of doors and windows. As Reiss explains, there is always in installation art 'a reciprocal relationship of some kind between the viewer and the work, the work and the space, and the space and the viewer' (xiii). What results is an accompanying appreciation of the significance of both the shoe as an individual object and that of the shoes when placed one after the other in the room. Because they are black, they cannot blend into the white surroundings, but they do become less obvious as shoes and thus dematerialize in that perceptual way. However, as we have discussed, the meaning of Shen's installation extends beyond this triangular relationship to the social, historical and political environments as well. The critical stance noted in Moser's fifth point concerning '[l']invitation au récepteur de s'engager dans une activité critique à partir de son expérience esthétique' ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 29) is evident most prominently here, given the work's criticism of past, restrictive mores affecting women in China.



Figure 9: *Uncomfortable shoes* (2008, Galerie kamel mennour). © ADAGP Shen Yuan. Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris/London.

Both *Uncomfortable shoes* and *Pont* foreground the relationship between walking and seeing: the former by inviting the viewer to follow both visually and physically the meandering words around the space, and the latter by being an object attracting attention and drawing viewers to it and/or around it. Moser certainly considered their wanderings to be central to artmotion, stating that it is not only 'une activité de réception', but that it also constitutes 'l'exécution même de l'œuvre' ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 9). In this way, the mobile body is deemed to be one of the work's materials, an essential component of both the conception and execution of the work, rather than an optional addition. In these two installations of Shen, the evocation of visual mobility plays as important a role as physical mobility and is closely entwined with it. The sociologist Ervin Goffman observed the visual practice of walking in urban surroundings in *Encounters, Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*, noting that the movement of pedestrians is directed by the eyes and involves the act of scanning one's environment. In other words, the eyes guide the mobile body. Similar to Goffman's work, James Gibson, a psychologist, produced studies on ecological perception and posited the theory of visual affordances in which the individual's perception of a given environment 'affords' or directs their movement through that space. As Gibson states, '[a]n open environment affords locomotion in any direction over the ground, whereas a cluttered environment affords locomotion only at *openings*' (Gibson 36). *Pont*, then, could be considered to partially block the visual field and to promote movement around it, in order to reach an opening, or stasis in front of it when stopping to contemplate. This suggests that Shen deploys this pre-cognitive, visual apprehension of the world around us in the siting of her works of art, knowing that spectators will use what Gibson calls 'natural vision' to make sense of them: 'we look around, walk up to something interesting and move around it so as to see it from all sides, and go from one vista to another. That is natural vision' (1). Placing an installation of an unusable bridge in a forest or urban park, both 'walkable surface[s]', draws people towards it (Turner and Penn 480). *Uncomfortable shoes* has its own distinct line of site/sight, determined by the most likely path of movement around the gallery room, from left to right and following the direction of the 'writing'. Mobility, in both of these artistic imaginings, arises out of visual activity. The viewer experiences the installation in their own steps and time, bringing along sensory responses, prior understanding and opinions about the meaning of the artwork. Their engagement is therefore central to the way the installation is experienced aesthetically and suggests that its meaning is neither univocal nor complete, since each participant adds and takes away different knowledge of the piece. In such works, the artist's creative act combines with the viewer's interpretative performance through the act of walking, making the latter, as Moser contends, 'intrinsèquement partie de l'œuvre' ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 9).

Moser is equally interested in installations showing obstacles to movement, examples of 'la mobilité entravée' which require the onlooker to interrogate the reasons for this limitation or, as he describes it, to reflect on 'la dialectique de mouvement-en-tant-que-liberté et interdiction de passage en tant que privation-de-liberté-de-mouvement' ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 25–6). While space for walking is restricted in Shen's *Un matin du monde* (2001, London), a replica rooftop of a Chinese house fitted within three walls of the gallery, the artist nevertheless achieves the impression of visual and cultural mobility without physical mobility by supplementing the sensory components of sound and touch. She employs technology here, for the first and (so far) only time, to replicate a breeze blowing across the rooftop and to recreate the sounds belonging to this slice of Chinese village life, such as bird song, barking dogs, the clucking of chickens and the chatter of humans. She goes beyond the visual to evoke entities that are not present but whose lack of physicality is nevertheless compensated for through sound and sensation. According to Moser, as already noted, the addition of a

soundscape offers a means to insert mobility into the reception of apparently static artworks ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 11). Indeed, through the collection of rural noises, the viewer is transported to Shen's homeland, a multisensorial journey which places the spectator in the role of the tourist who looks down on the clay tiles and observes the makeshift television aerial, a cloth hanging up on bamboo sticks and the shadow of an air-dried duck. With movement contained, the visitor is as stationary as the reproduced memory, anchored in the past, but we are given a brief glimpse of one of Shen's cultural reference points through this access to the memories and auditory sensations of the artist. John Urry has examined tourism from the point of view of its being 'one of the characteristics of the "modern" experience', focusing in particular on the link between the mobile and the visual, though this has attracted subsequent criticism from scholars interested in other forms of embodied leisure (*The Tourist Gaze* 4). Tourist activity, for them, goes beyond the eyes that see. For instance, Pau Obrador Pons contends that it is 'in fact, the entire body that is involved in tourist dwelling' (57). Other scholars, such as Jonathan Crary, credit the tourist gaze with more structure, purpose and mobility. Similarly, Giuliana Bruno does not believe that spectatorship is an immobile experience involving 'a motionless subject, enraptured in a state of solitary reverie' (114). Erwin Panofsky, an art historian, described how the spectator 'is in permanent motion as his eye identifies with the lens of the camera which permanently shifts in direction and distance' (218). It is certainly apparent that the viewer of Shen Yuan's *Un matin du monde* must, because physical movement around the work is not possible, actively direct their eyes to different aspects of the piece and to various objects within it, thus avoiding becoming transfixed by a singular ocular perception. At the same time, they are alert to the sounds and sensations that contribute to the multi-perspectival experience of another culture. If installations are 'passage works' as described by Anne Ring Petersen (27), the viewer of Shen's installation is on the threshold of seeing and thinking otherwise, of passing from knowledge about one culture to another, unfamiliar one. Shen thereby expands the viewer's ordinary sensorial capacity and transforms the tourist gaze into a kinetic, embodied practice. This exemplifies Moser's third conclusion drawn from his study of the installations at Inhotim, as mobility is seen, felt, thought and questioned in multiple ways due to different aesthetic strategies that succeed in engaging 'l'appareil sensoriel du récepteur' ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 5).

Conclusion

The transition from China to France has been the inspiration or starting point for a large number of Shen Yuan's installations, a selection of which have been studied here. They are characterized by movement within the pieces themselves and between various types of site (the gallery room, exhibition arena, public spaces), realms (the personal, social, historical) and cultures (Chinese, French, western).¹⁸ The site chosen may lend itself to the purely experiential or it may invoke larger questions – about self-expression, belonging, the past and politics – or indeed a combination of the two. Her use of both contained space and open space demonstrates the tension between site and community, because at times she invites the public into a gallery, studio or museum, and at other times brings art to the public. In both cases, she is involved in a discursive process of opening up and uniting the local and the global, the native and the foreign, the traditional and the modern. In these ways, which offer varied and rich transnational interactions, her installations illustrate well Moser's general preoccupation with 'une expérience esthétique comportant l'élément "mobilité"' ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 5). All in all, it has proved valid, and indeed fruitful, to apply recent findings from

¹⁸ Only a handful of her works to date exclude mobility and revolve around other concerns, such as the massive scale of construction in China's largest cities (*Crâne de la terre*, 2011) and the traditionally anthropomorphic hierarchy of our planet (*Étoiles du jour*, 2015).

mobility studies, especially Moser's theory of artmotion, to Shen's works and it is probable that correspondences with these may be found in the creative output of other contemporary artists in transit. This interesting and wider investigation remains to be conducted.

Moser's conception was particularly useful because it shed light on the way Shen's installations centre on the dynamism of mobility by evoking movement as a theme or by encouraging the audience to move around the exhibition space. His idea that apparently static works are reconceived as mobile during the artistic encounter through personal involvement and physical perambulation revealed how the spectators of Shen's works engage directly in aesthetic activities, often taking a critical stance, and become co-creators of the works and their multiple meanings. Moser's suggestion that technology may contribute to the artistic experience of mobility resonated in one of Shen's installations, *Un matin du monde*, which deployed sounds to transport the viewer to another culture. His observation concerning the transformation of art forms and their shifting meanings as the materials from which they are constituted deteriorate or change corporeally helps us to understand more fully those of Shen's works that place emphasis on the passage of change over space and time and on the ephemerality of the artistic figuration. Finally, Moser's general conclusion about artmotion led to the worthwhile finding that Shen makes use of all the aesthetic layers of her works – materials, form, structure, texture, techniques, setting – to produce the effect of motion and to challenge simple or univocal denotations.

In addition to these correspondences between artmotion and Shen Yuan's aesthetic practice, this study has revealed that her art relies on the interrelation between the objects of the material world and the perceptual meanings derived from this world as we experience, inhabit and move through it. In doing so, the installations foreground, through their materiality, sensorial effects and evocation of mobility, the fact that both the creation and the experience of art are always social, dialogical practices, always in process and taking place over time. The advance and retreat of the fabricated tongues emphasizes the links between materiality, language and loss while suggesting the unpredictability of these movements from the point of view of the spectator who must respond, for instance, by getting out of the way. People moving together in time through the act of bouncing not only foregrounds collective, bodily movement, but also conveys perceptual, and thereby psychological, awareness and connectedness. Through this activity Shen achieves another layer of the performative which undergirds the more obvious performance of movement. Several of her works take advantage of the relationship between seeing and walking, another type of experiential exploration, and sometimes involve an exercise in defamiliarization. The reciprocity between the moving body, the space of the artwork and the object exhibited gains importance at the same time as the pre-cognitive understanding of the world of phenomena through the viewer's eyes is shown to guide their physical displacement. Occasionally, Shen's appeal to other senses, such as hearing and touch, turns reception, based primarily on a visual apprehension of an object, into a more multisensorial and kinetic experience. It is not unusual for contemporary installations to involve such a performative and engaged understanding of the viewer's role, but Shen's artwork is distinctive in this respect in that its synaesthetic aesthetics, revolving mostly around mobility, makes it perceptually and ontologically challenging.

Finally, what conclusions may be drawn regarding Shen's transcultural aesthetics as expressed through the installations studied? The Chinese referent appears, disappears and reappears in these works, mirroring the way in which her judgement as an artist frequently goes beyond national borders to attain a universal, contemporary consciousness and ethical stance. Although rooted in past experiences and never losing her original identity, she is evidently open to transcultural reflection. She has sought inspiration from traditional Chinese culture in order 'to connect to the global contemporary art scene' (*Initiart Magazine*), and

considers this dual approach to be enriching since it adds a multicultural dimension and treats cultures as open systems. When the traditional and familiar are brought to bear on the modern and the new in this way, the latter are revitalized and made appropriate for a transnational age. Even if a distinct, local sense is obvious in her works, they nevertheless reach out to other cultures, exceed the borders of national culture to inhabit a diasporic space, and allow the possibility of a plurality of trajectories. Shen has exhibited in France, Spain, Germany, England, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Italy, Canada, the United States, China, South Korea and Japan, and has thereby been involved in 'la migration de l'œuvre d'art elle-même' (Moser, 'Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 16), sometimes creating works tailored to the inside or outside space allotted and sometimes reconstructing the same piece elsewhere and in a slightly different way. Mobility, in this sense, is for Moser "performée" par les œuvres d'art elles-mêmes, qui sortent de leur enracinement local et voyagent pour être présentées à des publics transnationaux' ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 16). Furthermore, such movement and impermanence challenge the idea of site specificity, traditionally associated with installation art, and also the idea of cultural specificity. As part of the 'haut degré de complexité [et] des ambivalences calculées' that Moser observes in works exhibiting artmotion ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 29), Shen's works produce a sensation of personal disjunction, a feeling conveyed by installations that are strange, unsettling and yet familiar, suggesting that cultural mobility involves a difficult and constant negotiation between two parts of the self, 'le local-national et le mondial', as Moser defines them for other transnational artists ('Analyser les mobilités culturelles' 17). This is undoubtedly why she places as much importance on the procedures of distancing and estrangement from Chinese culture as on the memories triggered by the staging of images and the performance of sayings. Her installations, just like those studied by Moser, create 'le vécu d'un entre-deux, le passage forcé entre les deux positions' ('La culture en transit' 37) which depend on ephemeral transitions and the dynamism arising from the spectators' reception to convey, aesthetically, the mobility of contemporary culture. Shen's installations ask the spectator to recognize and reconcile meanings from the creative synthesis of materials, forms, senses and surroundings. They maintain cultural elements in tension, while being grounded in a global perspective on art, and show, ultimately, that the transcultural space of becoming is worth the struggle.

References

- Althusser, Louis. 'Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'Etat (Notes pour une recherche).' *La Pensée*, 151, June 1970, 3–38.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.' *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Ed. Arjun Appadurai. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 27–47. Print.
- Arrizón, Alicia. *Queering Mestizaje: Transculturation and Performance*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006. Print. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.171990>
- Augé, Marc. *Pour une anthropologie de la mobilité*. Paris: Payot et Rivages, 2009. Print.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernidade líquida*. Trans. Plínio Dentzien. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2001. Print.
- Bishop, Claire. 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.' *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*. Ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, 166–93. Print.
- Bishop, Claire. *Installation Art: A Critical History*. London: Tate Publishing, 2005. Print.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Esthétique relationnelle*. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2001. Print.
- Brebion, Dominique. 'Memory and the Contemporary Visual Arts of the Francophone Caribbean.' *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 13(3), 2009, 105–14. Online. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-2009-032>

- Bruno, Giuliana. 'Streetwalking around Plato's Cave.' *October* 60, Spring 1992, 110–29. Print. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/779037>
- Chamarette, Jenny. 'The Disappearing Work: Chantal Akerman and Phenomenologies of the Ephemeral.' *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 17(3), 2013, 347–56. Print. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17409292.2013.790631>
- Crary, Jonathan. *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999. Print. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/6569.001.0001>
- Cresswell, Tim. *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*. London/New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- De Landa, Manuel. *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*. New York: Zone Books, 1997. Print.
- Gagen, Elizabeth A. 'Measuring the Soul: Psychological Technologies and the Production of Physical Health in Progressive Era America.' *Environment and Planning D* 24, 2006, 827–50. Print. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1068/d373t>
- Gibson, James. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1979. Print.
- Giddens, Anthony. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990. Print.
- Goffman, Ervin. *Encounters, Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961. Print.
- Greenblatt, Stephen., ed. *Cultural Mobility – A Manifesto*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Print.
- Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989. Print.
- Hernández, Felipe, Mark Millington and Iain Borden. Eds. *Transculturation: Cities, Spaces and Architectures in Latin America*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005. Print. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401201247>
- Inda, Jonathan Xavier and Renato Rosaldo. 'Tracking Global Flows.' *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader*. Ed. Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo. Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008, 27–47. Print.
- Kelly, Niamh Ann. 'What is Installation Art?' *Irish Museum of Modern Art*, 2010, 4–18. Print.
- Lee, Laura and Kristi Peterson. 'The Global Art of Zao Wou-ki.' *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 21(1), 2017, 118–26. Online. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17409292.2017.1303973>
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991. Print.
- Lionnet, Françoise. 'Cultivating Mere Gardens? Comparative Francophonies, Postcolonial Studies, and Transnational Feminisms.' *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*. Ed. Haun Saussy. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2006, 100–13. Print.
- McNeill, William. *Keeping Together in Time*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995. Print.
- Millington, Mark. 'Transculturation: Contrapuntal Notes to Critical Orthodoxy.' *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 26(2), 2007, 256–68. Print. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1470-9856.2007.00223.x>
- Moreiras, Alberto. *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies*. Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2001. Print. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822380597>
- Moser, Walter. 'Analyser les mobilités culturelles.' Introduction to *Mobilités culturelles: regards croisés Brésil/Canada/Cultural Mobilities: A Cross-Perspective between Brazil and Canada*. Eds. Pascal Gin and Walter Moser. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2011, 3–32. Print.

- Moser, Walter. 'La culture en transit: locomotion, médiamotion et artmotion.' *Gragoatá*, 17, 2004, 25–41. Print.
- 'Naum Gabo. Kinetic Construction (Standing Wave).' *Tate.org*, n.d. Web. 31 Aug. 2016.
- Obrador Pons, Pau. 'Being-on-Holiday: Tourist Dwelling, Bodies and Place.' *Tourist Studies*, 3, 2003, 47–66. Print. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797603040530>
- Ortiz, Fernando. *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. Trans. Harriet de Onís. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995. Print.
- Panofsky, Erwin. 'Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures.' Eds. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen. *Film Theory and Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. Print.
- Papastergiadis, Nikos. *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*. Polity Press: Cambridge, 2000. Print.
- Pollack, Barbara. *Brand New Art from China. A Generation on the Rise*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris and Co., 2018. Print.
- Popper, Frank. *Art, Action and Participation*. New York: New York University Press, 1975. Print.
- Popper, Frank. *Art of the Electronic Age*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1993. Print.
- Popper, Frank. *L'art cinétique: l'image du mouvement dans les arts plastiques depuis 1860*. Paris: Gauthier-Villars Éditeur, 1970. Print.
- Popper, Frank. *Origins and Development of Kinetic Art*. New York: New York Graphic Society/Studio Vista, 1968. Print.
- Reiss, Julie H. *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art*. New York: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999. Print.
- Ring Petersen, Anne. *Installation Art between Image and Stage*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2015. Print.
- 'Shen Yuan: Just like a Fish in Water.' *Art Asia*, Winter 2003, 45–8. Print.
- 'Shen Yuan.' *Le Festin. La Revue du Patrimoine et de la Création Aquitaine*, 7 Apr.–22 July 2012, 24–5. Print.
- Shilton, Siobhán. *Transcultural Encounters: Gender and Genre in Franco-Maghrebi Art*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013. Print.
- Souriau, Paul. *L'esthétique du mouvement*. Paris: F. Alcan, 1889. Print.
- Spitta, Silvia. *Between Two Waters: Literary Transculturation in Latin America*. Houston, TX: Rice University Press, 1995. Print.
- Teo, Phyllis. 'Hybridization, Appropriation and Identity: Moving Images of Singapore Artists Ho Tzu Nyen and Ming Wong.' *Asian Cinema*, 26(1), 2015, 99–115. Print. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.26.1.99_1
- Ting, Selena. 'Interview: Shen Yuan.' *Initiart Magazine*, 1 Nov. 2010. Web. 28 Mar. 2018.
- 'Trampoline 1 2 3 4 5.' *Musée de l'histoire de l'immigration*, n.d. Web. 28 Mar. 2018.
- Turner, Alasdair and Alan Penn. 'Encoding Natural Movement as an Agent-Based System: An Investigation into Human Pedestrian Behaviour in the Built Environment.' *Environment and Planning B*, 29, 2002, 473–90. Print. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1068/b12850>
- Urry, John. *Mobilities*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007. Print.
- Urry, John. *Sociology beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty First Century*. London/New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Urry, John. *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. London: Sage, 1990. Print.

How to cite this article: Silvester, R 2019 Art and Motion: Shen Yuan's Transcultural Aesthetics. *Modern Languages Open*, 2019(1): 4 pp. 1–25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.232>

Published: 27 June 2019

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

]u[*Modern Languages Open* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Liverpool University Press.

OPEN ACCESS 