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# Intermedial Theatre and the Infrastructural Turn



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### Abstract

This essay analyses two intermedial theatre productions that bookend a historical moment of political and social transition in Hong Kong: Rimini Protokoll's *Remote Hong Kong* and Zuni Icosahedron's *Bach is Heart Sutra*. In both works, the audience participates in the action, the action is mediated by technology, and the performance environments are integral to the dramaturgy. Applying infrastructural thinking as a conceptual framework, this essay suggests how theatre studies might engage with the "infrastructural turn." Infrastructure offers a productive lens for examining a style of theatre that highlights not the psychology of individual characters but the broader technological systems that mediate and organise our relationships to each other and the places we inhabit and that train our sensorium to see, act, and think in ways come to feel natural. As political crises and the becoming environmental of technology are provoking humans to rethink our autonomy and centrality, theatre is expanding its frames and displacing the human protagonist to foreground our participation within the infrastructures that sustain and constrain us.

### Keywords

Intermedial theatre · urban performance · infrastructure · Rimini Protokoll · Zuni Icosahedron.



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## Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been an “*infrastructural turn*” across academic disciplines, from anthropology to media studies to history. Even in the fields where infrastructure is an obvious object of study—urban planning, architecture—it has been expanded to become a way of thinking not just about systems of connectivity and circulation but also about the social, political, and aesthetic relations these systems make possible. In “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” cultural anthropologist Brian Larkin writes:

*Infrastructures are built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space. As physical forms they shape the nature of a network, the speed and direction of its movement, its temporalities, and its vulnerability to breakdown. They comprise the architecture for circulation, literally providing the undergirding of modern societies, and they generate the ambient environment of everyday life.*<sup>1</sup>

He adds, “*But infrastructures also exist as forms separate from their purely technical functioning, and they need to be analysed as concrete semiotic and aesthetic vehicles.*” For Larkin, “*Focusing on the issue of form, or the poetics of infrastructure, means being alive to the formal dimensions of infrastructures and understanding how they address and constitute subjects.*”<sup>2</sup> Anthropology has developed a relational approach that analyses how infrastructures operate as an interweaving of social practices, moral codes, and technical networks. As Susan Leigh Star writes, “*infrastructure is a fundamentally relational concept, becoming real infrastructure only in relation to organized practices.*”<sup>3</sup> AbdouMaliq Simone argues that answer to the question “*what is it that we can do together?*” is largely a question of infrastructure: the material in-betweenness that puts people and things in relation through a continuous interchange of materials, knowledge, and meaning.<sup>4</sup>

Infrastructure is a productive lens for analysing a style of theatre that highlights not the psychology of individual characters but the broader systems that mediate and organise our relationships to each other and the places we inhabit and that train our sensorium to see, act, and think in ways come to feel natural. Through an examination of two productions, one by Berlin-based theatre collective, Rimini Protokoll, and one by Hong Kong-based theatre company, Zuni Icosahedron, this essay suggests how infrastructural thinking can be useful for theatre and performance studies. While several terms could be used to categorise these case studies—participatory, site-specific, immersive, postdramatic—the term *intermedial* is used here to foreground how audio, visual, and sound technologies are central actors in these productions. As Chiel Kattenbelt defines it, intermediality describes the “*co- or interrelations between media that result in a redefinition of the media, which by impacting upon each other, provoke in turn a resensibilised perception.*”<sup>5</sup> In both productions, technology mediates participants’ access to the works themselves and the environments within which they take place. By deploying technologies to complicate habituated ways of seeing, thinking, and moving, these productions challenge modes of attention conditioned by the globalising technologies of Big Tech and practice alternative ways of seeing and moving still possible within Hong Kong’s changed

<sup>1</sup>Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42 (2013): 328.

<sup>2</sup>Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” 329.

<sup>3</sup>Susan Leigh Star, “The Ethnography of Infrastructure,” *American Behavioural Scientist*, 43, no.3 (1999): 380. A primary quality of infrastructure, according to Star, is its “*Embeddedness*. Infrastructure is sunk into and inside of other structures, social arrangements, and technologies” (381).

<sup>4</sup>AbdouMaliq Simone, “Infrastructure: Commentary by AbdouMaliq Simone,” *Cultural Anthropology*, <https://journal.culanth.org/index.php/ca/infrastructure-abdoulmaliq-simone>, accessed 18 October 2024.

<sup>5</sup>Chiel Kattenbelt, “Intermediality in Performance and as a Mode of Performativity,” *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, eds., Sarah Bay-Cheng, Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender, and Robin Nelson (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 35.



political landscape. In these works, technology is understood not as an external tool, but as an infrastructure mediating our relationships to places, people, ideas, and things. By tutoring new ways of acting with and within the technological and social infrastructures that sustain us, these productions, in different ways, respond to the question “*what is it that we can do together?*”

### Digital Infrastructures: configuring trust and collectivity in the sentient city

As the People’s Republic of China (PRC) asserts its power over Hong Kong, the city is being absorbed, economically and spatially, into the mainland via large-scale infrastructure projects that connect it to the Greater Bay Area (GBA). As the Silicon Valley of Asia, the GBA links eleven cities and over 80 million inhabitants, creating a giant mega-urban region wherein technology production, maritime transportation, and financial services converge and expand outward to the new markets China is setting up in Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America. With its historic reputation as an entrepot and its established financial and maritime infrastructures, Hong Kong remains an important link between China and its overseas markets, especially as international distrust grows regarding the PRC’s geopolitical ambitions and technological capabilities.

In Hong Kong, that distrust reached a boiling point in 2019, when large-scale protests activated the city itself as an agent of disruption. Adopting a “be water” strategy inspired by Bruce Lee, which advises yielding to one’s surroundings rather than resisting, protestors filtered through the city’s infrastructural networks (Mass Transit Railway [MTR] stations, malls, tunnels, airports, major roads) and radically interrupted its rhythms. As Hong Kong’s largest and most sustained uprisings, the 2019 protests began as opposition to a proposed extradition bill but quickly evolved into a youth-led movement defending the city’s freedoms enshrined in the Basic Law, which promise protections for speech, assembly, religion, and the rule of law until Hong Kong’s full return to China in 2047. The protests themselves operated as a kind of infrastructural intervention, repurposing the city’s built environment to disrupt infrastructures of mobility, commerce, and circulation, and challenge an economic logic that prioritises seamless flows of people, goods, and capital over political expression.<sup>6</sup>

It is in cities (Hong Kong and elsewhere) where infrastructures are most concentrated. In *Seeing Like a City*, Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift argue that “*cities are, above all, entwined infrastructures,*” and it is these sociotechnical systems “*that give cities their world making power.*”<sup>7</sup> While cables, pipes, and transportation networks are the most visible infrastructures, under the skin of cities is a less visible digital infrastructure that sets the pace and manages the performance of cities and their residents. According to geographers Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge, today, nearly every urban practice is mediated by code. They call such mediated urban environments “*code/space,*” a dyad that articulates how “*the production of space is increasingly dependent on code, and code is written to produce space.*”<sup>8</sup> Examples of code/space include airports, malls, networked offices, homes, and cafés that are transformed into workspaces by laptops and wireless access. Code/space is automated and automating: as we interact with urban space through our devices, algorithms track and predict our behaviours, thus requiring less thought and decision-making from us. Architect Mark Shepard coined the term “*sentient city*” to describe how cities sense, think, and *act on* human residents through data-gathering technologies embedded in urban infrastructure.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup>For a more detailed account of the protests, see Sony Devabhaktuni and Joanna Mansbridge, “Democracy’s Dislocations: Spaces of Protest and the People of Hong Kong,” *Public Culture* 34(1) (2022): 99-121.

<sup>7</sup>Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Seeing Like a City*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016, 106.

<sup>8</sup>Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge, *Code/Space: Software and Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), x.

<sup>9</sup>Mark Shepard, “Toward the Sentient City,” in *Sentient Cities: Ubiquitous Computing, Architecture, and the Future of Urban Space*, ed. Mark Shepard (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 26.



In August 2018, one year before the 2019 protests erupted and when the 2014 Umbrella Movement was still fresh in public memory, Berlin-based theatre collective Rimini Protokoll brought their touring production, *Remote X*, to Hong Kong. Rimini devises productions that often stage encounters between participants and the labour and technologies that keep cities running. For example, *Cargo X* ('X' stands in for the name of the cities that the productions travel to) puts its audience in the back of a see-through freight truck so they can watch how a city works from the perspective of long-haul truck drivers, who tell their story along the way. Rimini's productions, moreover, articulate a larger cultural infrastructure of theatre-making that, as Shannon Jackson points out, relies on the "living infrastructure" of a globalised service economy: tech experts in major urban hubs, participants eager for an interactive theatrical experience, and "an international arts world that values a theatre from elsewhere."<sup>10</sup>

With over 80 iterations staged in cities around the world, *Remote X* is an urban walking tour in which an AI voice guides a group of 50 participants through different infrastructural spaces. The piece highlights how predictive and location-based technologies influence not only our movements, but also our interests, decision-making, and attachments to each other and to the places we inhabit. For the English iteration of *Remote Hong Kong*, the participants—a mix of local ethnic Chinese and international Hong Kong residents in their twenties and thirties—gathered at the Chinese Christian Cemetery in Lok Fu. Here, we met our human guide, June, who handed out headphones, a signature Rimini accessory.<sup>11</sup> Putting on our headphones we meet Rachel, a simulated AI voice that will guide us through various neighbourhoods over the next two hours. She will use our bodies to gather information about how we interact with one another, with the urban environment, and with her voice. She introduces herself by saying: "My name is Rachel. I sound a bit artificial. Sorry. I am not human. But I will try to be your friend. I am programmed for you. I am programmed so that you will always find your way." She then asks us to reflect on the cemetery's artificially cultivated flowers and the processes of death and decay they mark. The relationship between artificial (landscaped gardens, AI) and organic (decomposing corpses, our bodies) provided a conceptual starting point for the tour. Rachel tells us to choose a tombstone and reflect on the life it commemorates, while she calculates our capacity to empathise with deceased strangers and the history they conjure. My mind wandered to a government advertisement I had read recently in an MTR station encouraging cremation and burial at sea as a space saving, "green" way of handling the death of loved ones. Suddenly, the graveyard seemed an extravagant use of land and an uncanny counterpart to Rachel's disembodied voice.

Before setting out onto the streets, Rachel designates our group "the horde," a slightly disparaging term that also reveals how she sees us: as reservoirs of data. She asks us if we feel powerful being part of a group, or constrained. This seemingly simple question prompted reflection on the tension between collective action and individual agency—and technology's role in mediating both. The question resonated in a city defined by both a defiant proto-democratic spirit and a hyper-capitalist ethos of efficiency, productivity, and individual success. Throughout the tour, Rachel will test our trust in each other, while eliciting our trust in her.

<sup>10</sup>Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 180.

<sup>11</sup>This account of *Remote Hong Kong* is based on my participation in the tour on 18 August 2018.





**Figure 1** : Rimini Protokoll's *Remote Hong Kong*, 2018. Photo Thomas Lin, courtesy of Tai Kwun.

Our first stop is Lok Fu MTR station, where Rachel prompts us to play the role of audience by sitting on the stairs and observing the choreography of commuters coming and going. She tells us that some of the people will stare at us, others will pretend not to notice. She's right, and her accuracy in predicting human behaviour reinforces our trust in her authority. Rachel directs us to clap for the "performers." Just as the theatrical frame is introduced, it is undone by our reintegration into the parade of moving bodies. We jump onto the train to the tune of Van Halen's "Jump," disrupting the decorum of restraint inside. Rachel comments on how the other passengers manage their discomfort with being in such close proximity to strangers by burying themselves in their phones or sleeping. She's right. Turning our attention back to our own behaviour, she asks, "*Do you get tired?*" She reassures me that I too can sleep; she will wake me "*at the end of the journey.*" After a long pause, she adds, "*Trust me.*" When we get off at Shek Kip Mei station, Rachel bids the other passengers farewell with "*Goodbye. Safe journey. Go to hell. You're not one of us.*" The abrupt shift in tone, from friendly AI guide to hostile leader provoked the question: Will we continue to follow her directions, even if she seems not so neutral after all? Knowing this is a performance, we went along.

Rachel knows every detail about our environment, but she needs our bodies to learn things she doesn't yet understand, like empathy and trust: "*I want to learn from you what that is,*" she tells us. Rachel earns our trust with her seeming care and seemingly limitless knowledge of where we want to go and how best to get there. She tells us when to speed up to catch a pedestrian light and when we need to stop and wait. And she learns from our waiting: "*What do you do when you're doing nothing? I want to understand,*" she says. Rachel's candidness amplifies how our interactions with technologies train these technologies to "know" us more intimately for the purposes of predicting and directing our behaviour more efficiently.

Midway through the tour, the voice switches from Rachel to Peter. Peter leads us into St. Francis of Assisi Church in Shek Kip Mei, and from this point on, our horde is differentiated based on our beliefs about time, the afterlife, the rule of law, and the obligations we have to strangers. Inside the church, we were arbitrarily divided between the elites, who were led out, and the rest, who remained inside. Those who remained were obviously directed to wave at the elites as we left the chapel, but we were directed to look at them without waving back. This refusal to return a mundane gesture felt chilling, implying how we respond more willingly to our technologies than to each other. After all, we could have waved back, but none of us did.

The headphones, and the voice they mediated, defined the dramaturgy of the tour and the dynamic of the horde, both uniting us under common directions and preventing us from interacting with one another. We were remote from one another and remote controlled: a group of atomised urban residents interacting not with one another, but with a voice that mediated our relationship to the city and that, despite its dubious intentions, we trusted to direct us.

We ended the tour on the rooftop of Concordia Lutheran middle school. Here, the two halves of the horde reunited, and together we stepped onto a long podium facing the Hong Kong skyline. Peter asks us whether we preferred Rachel's voice to his, adding "*you still seem to believe in this idea of gender.*" Implying that his computational mind is beyond such social constructs, Peter reinforces the common misconception that our technologies are rational and free from biases of gender, race, class, or religion. As I reached for my mobile phone, suddenly fearful of forgetting details of the tour, Peter says, "*You will not need to remember anything anymore. I will remember for you. I never forget.*" I was gripped with an awareness that I was enacting his promise: my recorded memories were now his data. The tour concluded with neither a question nor a prompt, but a prediction: "*You have lent me your body; soon I will come for your mind. Then, it will feel completely natural.*" *Remote Hong Kong* prompted a reflection on how digital infrastructures direct our movements, elicit trust, and learn from our embodied responses to the city. Our increasingly intimate relationships with digital technologies often obscure the ways in which these technologies manipulate our attention and foster an illusion of control—a belief that we are in charge of the information we have access to, the people we connect to, the environments we move through. When Peter's voice was gone, our horde stood together looking out toward the city, contemplating our relationship to it, to one another, and to the voice that brought us here. As we do, vapor is released from a bulky aluminium tube, a theatrical effect that put the visible seams of theatre into dialogue with the less visible infrastructures that orchestrate performances of and in the digital city.

### Transitional Infrastructures: experiments in unlearning

Infrastructures can also be thought of as the material and affective movements within social relations. In Lauren Berlant's social theory, infrastructure is not an external system of connection and distribution, but instead, it is a way of describing the affective and material relations that bind us to the world and to one another. For them, the habits, norms, and institutions that condition our attachments and aspirations and organise our relationships to each other function as infrastructure. Unlike the rigidity implied by the term "*structure*," Berlant describes infrastructure as "*the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure.*"<sup>12</sup> Berlant's concept of infrastructuralism explores how we become attached to the people, objects, and ideas that feel essential to sustaining our lifeworld. These attachments, however, also require us to adapt to what Berlant calls "*the friction of collaborative life.*"<sup>13</sup> This friction—what they term "*inconvenience*"—emerges when our desire to remain connected to the world is met with reminders of our lack of control over events, outcomes, and other people.

From this perspective, infrastructures can be seen as the frameworks that enable us to navigate the "*inconveniences*" of social existence. Infrastructuralist thinking questions ingrained habits and normalised associations, encouraging us to "*unlearn*" or "*loosen*" the objects (ideas, concepts, things, people) we cling to. As Berlant notes, we cannot simply get rid of an object that serves as a foundational support, but we can engage with the contradictions it generates to reshape and reimagine the relationships it enables.<sup>14</sup> Berlant introduces the idea of "*transitional infrastructure*" to describe the process of navigating moments

<sup>12</sup>Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 20.

<sup>13</sup>Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 7.

<sup>14</sup>Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 28.



when the continuity of social life is disrupted, and we are called to reinvent the systems that help manage the unpredictability, ambivalence, and everyday contingencies of contemporary life.

What might it mean to consider theatre as a form of infrastructure in Berlant's sense? To explore this, I return to Hong Kong during a moment in 2021, when theatres briefly reopened amid the pandemic. In a city grappling with unprecedented social and political changes, Zuni Icosahedron presented *Bach is Heart Sutra*, a two-part performance, rooted in Buddhist philosophy and shaped by immersive soundscapes, that offered a reorientation of perception and a reimagining of how people might gather at a time when collective assembly had been largely suppressed. *Bach is Heart Sutra* became a space not just for performance, but for practicing a different kind of collectivity.<sup>15</sup>

While the pandemic was a disorienting time around the globe, in Hong Kong this disorientation was exacerbated by the political turmoil of the protests and the suddenness of their suppression. When, in January 2020, reports emerged of a novel coronavirus in Wuhan, the Hong Kong government responded swiftly with strict pandemic measures: closing borders, enforcing prolonged quarantines, and imposing midnight lockdowns across entire city blocks. In June 2020, the national security law (NSL) was swiftly passed, and distinctions between public health restrictions and NSL enforcement blurred, giving rise to a climate of imposed consensus and coerced unity throughout the city. Visible traces of protest were, by this time, erased: slogans on building facades were painted over, windows boarded up, brick sidewalks that had been dismantled and remade into barriers against police were patched with cement. In this atmosphere of isolation, disorientation, and erasure, Hong Kong-based collective Zuni Icosahedron turned to theatre as a form of infrastructure, offering a space to reflect, recalibrate, and experiment with new ways of moving within a transformed social landscape.

Zuni's co-artistic directors, Danny Yung and Mathias Woo, bring a spatial sensitivity to their theatrical practice. Trained as architects, Yung and Woo create works that often transform the theatre into an abstracted reflection of the city: an urban microcosm where architecture becomes metaphor. Central to their work is the principle of intermediality: a dynamic interplay between sound, text, image, and space that disrupts habitual modes of perception and invites new ways of sensing. For Zuni, technology is not merely an aesthetic layer; it is a relational infrastructure. Their experiments with technology train a sensorium tuned not to individual agency but to the body's co-existence with the world. As Woo explains, Zuni's approach to technology cultivates an "*understanding the body, consciousness and the world.... [It is a] technology of the body, inner self-knowledge,*" rather than an external tool or system.<sup>16</sup> By integrating Buddhist principles into their technological engagements, their approach resonates with the philosophy of Yuk Hui, who challenges the dominant narrative of technology as a universal system and singular future shaped by Big Tech. Hui proposes the concept of "*technodiversity,*" a term that highlights how technology is shaped by distinct cultural, aesthetic, moral, and philosophical systems embedded in specific milieux.<sup>17</sup> Art, Hui argues, can illuminate these pluralities and help us reimagine other technological futures. In this sense, Zuni's theatre becomes a living model of technodiversity, where technology is not an external or monolithic system, but an embedded, embodied, and culturally inflected mode of existence.

Woo conceived *Bach is Heart Sutra* as a shared space for reflection and reinvention, a setting where participants could attune to their breath, their rhythms, and cultivate a renewed awareness of their own being. At the centre of the work is the Heart Sutra, a foundational Buddhist text often encapsulated by the

<sup>15</sup>*Bach is Heart Sutra* took place on 23-24 April and 8-9 May 2021 at Hong Kong's Cultural Centre in Tsim Sha Tsui. The performers in part one were Cedric Chan, Ellen Kong, Dan Tse, Luka Wong, David Yeung, and Rebecca Yip.

<sup>16</sup>Mathias Woo, "Mindfulness, Technology, Art." Zuni Icosahedron, accessed 12 October 2025. <https://zuniseason.org.hk/en/z-live/mindfulness-technology-art/>

<sup>17</sup>Yuk Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 50.



phrase “*form is emptiness, emptiness is form.*” This paradoxical teaching expresses the essence of Buddhist philosophy: that all things are empty of an independent existence. As Victor Fan explains, Buddhism, in all its diversity, is built on a single principle: interdependence. He explains, “*forms do not originate from an essence or self-nature but are interdependently originated, and extinguished, from one moment to another, out of a layout of causes and conditions.*”<sup>18</sup> Forms are thus inherently empty of existential values and a separate self-identity.

Known as the First Door of Liberation, the concept of emptiness may seem at odds with Hong Kong’s famously dense urban landscape. Yet it offers a different way of seeing, one that shifts focus away from the city’s physical structures and political divisions and toward a mode of “*unlearning*” and reimagining other ways of co-existing together within a changing Hong Kong. *Bach is Heart Sutra* explored the concept of emptiness to reconsider what freedom and collective existence mean in a context where dissent has become unlawful and where gathering has been severely circumscribed. Presented over two weekends, the production unfolded in two distinct parts. The first part was staged in the Cultural Centre’s expansive Grand Theatre. As the audience took their seats, a Bach concerto played softly, while screens onstage translated the Heart Sutra into both English and Chinese. Buddhist sutra chanting then began to play overtop the Bach concerto. The sounds were not blended harmoniously but instead played out in dissonant relation, their similarities as religious compositions made strange by their differing tonal qualities and cultural associations. While the soundscape gestured to the multiple cultural influences shaping Hong Kong’s social and aesthetic life, the intermingling of Bach and Buddhism did not tell a cliché history of “West meets East.” It seemed rather to amplify a convergence of geographies, aesthetics, and philosophies co-existing and transforming one another within a particular milieu.

The performance opened with six performers crossing the stage from left to right. The act of walking, a signature gesture in Zuni’s repertoire, traditionally evokes the directional symbolism of West and East. In this production, however, the repeated pacing conveyed a sense of anxious restlessness, entrapment, and constrained possibility. After several minutes of this movement, two young male performers paused to face the audience and led a guided breathing exercise designed to cultivate a state of relaxed alertness. As the audience became more attuned to their breath and bodily presence, the phrase “*emptiness is form, form is emptiness*” appeared on a screen suspended from the proscenium arch, signaling the central philosophical motif of the piece. Following this collective meditation, the ensemble transitioned into a series of shifting tableaux, alternating between silent exchanges, solitary moments, and group recitations of the Heart Sutra’s concluding mantra: *gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā* (“gone, gone, everyone gone to the other shore, awakening”). This first section of the production evoked the state of disorientation and restlessness that pervaded the city, while introducing the Heart Sutra as an alternative perspective to politics.

The second part of *Bach is Heart Sutra* was a walking meditation staged in the Studio Theatre. More intimate and inwardly focused, the walking mediation invited, at once, individual reflection and a collective experience of being together without a predetermined goal. For the first twenty minutes, participants engaged in a solitary analogue experience: copying the Heart Sutra in small bamboo scaffolded rooms set up outside the theatre. The bamboo scaffolds evoked Hong Kong’s architectural environment and the traditional construction methods unique to the city. Each space contained a desk, lamp, pencil, and a long sheet of paper with the sutra faintly printed. Participants, wearing FM headphones playing Bach fugues, copied the text at their own pace. The quiet isolation recalled the pandemic, but here, screens were replaced by pencil and paper, and distraction gave way to focused calm.

<sup>18</sup>Victor Fan, *Cinema Illuminating Reality: Media Philosophy Through Buddhism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 7.



For the walking portion, participants were led to the theatre, which was configured as a black box with mirrors on all four sides. We were told to stay for as long as we wanted and invited to wander freely in the space or sit on cushions and just take in the immersive environment. The soundscape layered Buddhist sutra chanting atop Bach's concertos, interspersed with periods of silence. Scattered throughout the space were temperature monitors, stark reminders of the pandemic and the biometric technologies that had become part of daily life. Images of Hong Kong's densely packed skyscrapers were projected onto the floor, collapsing the boundary between city and self. Suspended from the ceiling were strips of white fabric inscribed with the phrase "emptiness is form, form is emptiness" in Chinese characters. These same characters were also digitally projected throughout the space, multiplying endlessly across mirrored walls in *mise en abyme*. This interplay of analogue and digital symbols evoked the proliferation of language and imagery in our hyperconnected age and pointed to the Second Door of Liberation in Buddhist thought: Signlessness. The concept of signlessness does not reject the existence of words, objects, or ideas that shape our perception. Instead, it invites us to look beyond their surface, resisting the urge to equate external appearances with a fixed meaning or separate self. It encourages a non-dualistic vision, which does not cling to form as stable or separate, but recognises the interdependence and impermanence of all things.



**Figure 2 :** *Walking meditation in Bach is Heart Sutra, 2021. Author's photo.*

The walking meditation cultivated a state of focused awareness, where each movement was deliberate and carried out with heightened awareness of the other participants in the space. In this way, it practiced the Third Door of Liberation: Aimlessness. Aimlessness is not a lack of direction, but a form of action—walking, in this case—that responds to present conditions rather than pursuing a fixed objective. Aimlessness liberates the individual from the burden of expected outcomes and the illusion that they are acting autonomously. To practice aimlessness is to recognise that every action is both enabled and constrained by web of other actions, rather than simply an act of individual agency. With its loose dramaturgy and contemplative atmosphere, the walking mediation can be read as an "object/scene," Berlant's conjoined word for describing situations where attachments can be loosened, questions asked, and "models of reciprocity" tested, without "be[ing] sure of the outcome in advance."<sup>19</sup> *Bach is Heart Sutra* offered an infrastructural scene, in Berlant's sense: a site where disruptions to everyday life became invitations to "unlearn" objects and concepts once thought stable and enduring and practice different ways of seeing and moving within conditions of constraint.

<sup>19</sup>Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 76.

Notably, the performers and Zuni staff involved in *Bach is Heart Sutra* were predominantly in their twenties—the age group most actively involved in the protests and, arguably, the most invested in the ideals they upheld. Since its formation in the early 1980s, Zuni has placed a strong emphasis on cultivating young artists, offering a platform for experimentation and creative expression. At a time when schools, universities, workplaces, and media were sequestered online and increasingly subject to (self-)censorship, *Bach is Heart Sutra* provided a rare space for young people to explore alternative modes of assembly and to reflect on themes such as selfhood, identity, and autonomy. To be clear, the production itself and Buddhist teachings on emptiness do not resolve Hong Kong’s political situation; however, they do help to loosen rigid identities and concepts and practice a kind of freedom that relies not on institutions or governments, but rather on a collective reimagining of the infrastructures that sustain collaborative life.

## Conclusion

In these examples of intermedial theatre, infrastructure acts as a technological system, an agency, and the very condition of social life. While *Remote Hong Kong* foregrounded the technological infrastructures that circumscribe our actions and condition our individual and collective choices, *Bach is Heart Sutra* deployed technology to reconfigure fixed ways of seeing and to practice an alternative way of assembling. In both, technology is more than simply an external system facilitating the movement of people, information, and things; rather, it is a relational infrastructure that mediates the affects, perceptions, and ways of seeing that hold together lives and worlds.

And yet these productions diverge in their approach to the situatedness of infrastructure. With its more localised awareness of a changing Hong Kong, *Bach is Heart Sutra* demonstrated how theatre can respond to moments of crisis and transition, where interruptions to the ordinary functioning of the everyday present opportunities to reevaluate the infrastructures that sustain attachments to a particular way of life. By design, *Remote Hong Kong* took a more generic approach to questioning the globalising technologies of Big Tech that dictate how and where we move and how and with whom we connect. The production is meant to resonate with residents and citizens around the world, and more localised meanings in each iteration only emerge from the connections the participants make between the local context and the global systems embedded within it. Bookending a historical moment of transition in Hong Kong, these productions offer valuable insights into how theatre can engage with and operate as infrastructure, revealing the elasticity within scenes that might otherwise seem closed or determined in advance.

In the wake of political rupture, technological saturation, and pandemic-induced isolation, intermedial theatre emerges here not merely as an aesthetic form but as a vital infrastructure, one that mediates collective experience, reconfigures perception, and rehearses alternative modes of being. In their dramaturgy, both works displace the autonomy of the individual with the friction of collaborating with and within more-than-human assemblages. By integrating sound, image, text, and spatial design, these works retrain the senses, inviting participants into spaces of reflection and experimentation. *Remote Hong Kong* and *Bach is Heart Sutra* foreground theatre’s capacity to accentuate, defamiliarise, and reconfigure the infrastructures holding together social and political life, and they do so not through spectacle, but through subtle recalibrations of collectivity, rhythm, attention, and attachment. Infrastructures not only support life; they shape how life is felt, imagined, and shared. Intermedial theatre, in this sense, becomes a site for unlearning habituated infrastructures and for inventing new infrastructures to manage the inconveniences of collective life. These productions do not offer solutions, but orientations: towards co-existence, towards technodiversity, and towards forms of freedom that arise not from sovereignty, but from our interdependence with each other and the technologies that sustain and constrain us.





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