

Art, Spirit, Community

Artist-in-Residency 2019-2020

Arts Initiative Tokyo – Bethel House – Times Museum

January 14th – February 29th, 2020

To see a full publication originally written both in Japanese and Chinese with photos and illustration, please follow the QR code below.



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Foreword

In early 2020, Arts Initiative Tokyo [AIT] has collaborated with Guangdong Times Museum in China and Bethel House in Hokkaido for the Artist-in-Residency program to take multiple angles to examine a relationship between art, spirit, and community.

The open call took place in and out of Guangzhou, and attracted more than fifty artists (including groups). The collaborating partners and AIT have selected an Guangzhou-based artist/dancer, ErGao to invite. During his 42-day residency, he stayed in Tokyo from January 26th to February 6th, followed by his time with members and social workers at Bethel House in Urakawa, Hokkaido, the respected community of the people with mental disabilities.

Inspired by “Self-Study Meeting”, the acknowledged practice of Bethel House which opens up one’s difficulties being experienced in life to share with others and take a self-research, the artist-in-residency created a deep communication and interaction through ErGao’s daily exercises and workshops. They based on various old songs and music pieces in addition to the most asked questions at the Bethel House “How are you doing?”. The various members and the staff, even from the neighborhood ErGao has met during his stay joined the final workshop. Back in Tokyo and Chiba, the activities continued with more workshops that children and adults collaboratively created their dance movements inspired by their personal memories over a sense of physicality.

“Art, Spirit, Community” documents ErGao’s residency from various locations along with articles contributed by the writers he also has encountered, and how the program unfolded.

Artist Profile

ErGao

Lives and works in Guangzhou, China

ErGao is a multi-media dancer/choreographer whose work uses dance, film, installation and other creative strategies. After graduating from Guangdong Cantonese Opera school in 2001, he studied in adult college class of joint college of Sun Yat-sen University and Guang Dong Dance College in 2002, majoring in contemporary dance. In 2006, he graduated from APA, Hong Kong with full scholarship.

ErGao founded ErGao Dance Production Group (EDPG) in 2007 in Guangzhou, with a focus on dance theatre, dance film, community art and dance education. His productions continuously see the body as the primary medium of work and the site of artistic investigation, using diverse strategies to explore Chinese social and cultural identities, sex, gender and other topics.

<http://www.ergaodance.cn/>

On Delineating and Sharing the Spirit

Naoko Horiuchi, Curator, AIT

This booklet documents part of a residency and workshop by ErGao, a dancer/choreographer who was invited to join the artist-in-residence program.¹

Focused on an examination of art and holistic thought which AIT has pursued in recent years, and adopting the theme of “art, spirit, and community” which has developed out of the dear Me Project², an initiative launched by AIT that aims to connect art and welfare, this program was realized in collaboration with the Times Museum in Guangzhou City in Guangdong Province, China, and Social Welfare Service Corporation Bethel House based in Urakawa Town, Hokkaido Prefecture.

From the end of January 2020, at the same time as ErGao's residency, an outbreak of the new Coronavirus disease occurred in Wuhan, China, and began to spread. The tinge of unease felt at that point was a sign of the global turmoil that would follow. By the time of ErGao's return to China at the end of February, the situation had escalated, and the movement of people had become difficult due to reduced flights and cancellations. Meanwhile in Japan, institutions were requested to refrain from or cancel events, and “contact” became an abnormal act. Causing a great many deaths across the world, the pandemic has transformed our lives in an instant, simultaneously leading mental health care to become an urgent issue.

Amidst such circumstances, the physical expression of ErGao, his experience of staying at Bethel House, and the workshops he organized with various participants provided an

¹ A video document of the workshop is scheduled to be made available on the AIT website. This booklet mainly documents the ideas and opinions of workshop participants and guests, included together with illustrations and photographs.

² An art and learning program initiated by AIT in 2016 directed towards children in various environments and artists. <http://dearme.a-i-t.net/>

opportunity to explore and realize a “space” where pain can be shared through creative expression. Bethel House is known for its practice of “self-study” where, as “your own specialist,” persons suffering from schizophrenia and other mental illnesses investigate ways of dealing with the difficulties of living. Its philosophy of encouraging its members to confront the burdens of life by voluntarily expressing themselves and engage in dialogue also overlaps with ErGao’s thinking, which is centered on transforming dialogue into physical expression and earnestly opening oneself to accept others. The exhibition of such “spirit” is what the mystical thinker, philosopher, and educator Rudolf Steiner expressed as a “visible language” at the root of speech and words, while it also bears a relation to Steiner’s concept of eurythmy, an art of movement that connects with cosmic energy³.

From here on, we will undoubtedly experience unforeseen diseases and climatic events as a result of unprecedented environmental changes. In an age when there is tremendous anxiety, the health of the mind will become an essential element for sustaining life more than it ever has before. When imagining the usefulness of art in the future, is it not also possible that a meditative awareness of the world attained by entrusting oneself to movements of the spirit will provide an alternative means of adapting to situations that cannot be comprehended by logical thought alone?

³ R. Steiner, *Vorträge über Kunst* (translation by Ryuhan Nishikawa, Shirakawa Shuppan Inc., 1987)

Three Cheers for Friendship—Thank You for Inviting Me to Your House

ErGao, Director of Ergao Dance Production Group, choreographer

For me, the six-week residence program in Japan was the longest participatory art program I have ever taken part in. To date, I have presented most of my work in the form of theater or video or presented it in public spaces. For this program, the direction of my creative research developed gradually, and I had a growing interest in the idea of “living with more people” in particular.

In this program, I stayed at Bethel House in Urakawa Town in Hokkaido, participated in the meetings and work of its members, and led recreation and dance activities. Most likely because I was the first guest from China, they gave me lots of small gifts each day. A-san told me the story of aliens every day in a lively manner. Matsumoto-san to the computer for three hours each day and was especially fond of the Beatles song *Imagine*. Taichi-san, who sat quietly in a corner of the room all day long and had a hard time stopping himself from drinking water, appeared as if he was on an isolated island surrounded by perpetually flowing water.... Using a small GoPro camera, I recorded many of the moments that were happening simultaneously while trying to blend in with the environment they created. What impressed me most was that when we talked about songs and our hometowns, I felt a sense of déjà vu in all the scenes, mountains, food, and other things that each member spoke about. And the place filled with a gentle and joyful energy as we moved our bodies gently to delightful music in response to the gradual loss of such traditional things.

Yuuki Aoki, an artist I met in Tokyo, says he was led to think about the essence and significance of dance after witnessing 9/11 while staying in the United States, leading him to return to Tokyo from New York. Thereafter, he initiated dance activities with people who have experienced living on the street and went on to launch a dance company called Newcomer H Sokerissa! 15 years ago. A documentary film that follows their activities titled *Dancing Homeless* is about to be released, and it contains many

moving stories about how respective members face various problems, pursue dance, and continue to wander the streets even while losing their way in life.

These experiences likely provide a valid explanation for the function of dance as a form of “interaction and exchange.” Dance, or art in general, creates a process of interaction and function through language. Of course, dance skills in themselves have also evolved. As a creator, I think the question of how these personal and valuable experiences and impressions can be transformed into a collective experience and collective space within an artwork will be an important aspect of future thought. Inspired by this residence program, the dance company I founded in Guangzhou, Ergao Dance Production Group, is also slowly beginning to change, attempting to make expressive forms where the active involvement of participants becomes a major part of its activities.

In the past, I felt that art was comparable to a star in the sky, while the creative process through which one reaches that star was like the shaping of a “diamond” resembling its form. Since then, it has gradually become clear to me that diamonds are in a place far out of reach and unnecessary for most spectators. Now, I want my work to be like glass. Inexpensive, simple, with a sense of the everyday and yet highly personal, I want to achieve something that anyone can own, that can be enjoyed as if one were playing in mud, something that can be arranged on a table.

Column

Michitaka Higuchi (social worker, Bethel House)

During the 12 days ErGao stayed in Urakawa, he brought a new kind of extraordinary to Bethel even as he acquainted himself with daily life here, already made extraordinary by various challenges. At Bethel, “disclose your weakness” is a slogan we value, and what was wonderful for us was that ErGao spoke honestly not as a dancer or instructor but as an individual who faces hardships, describing his relationship to his own family and conflicts as a dancer.

The dance we created together in the final workshop was an exciting and memorable experience both for the members and staff. ErGao, please come again!

A Language for Communication

Veronica Wong

Former Chief Curator, Public Programmes Department, Guangdong Times Museum | Currently Education and Public Programmes Curator at Tai Kwun Contemporary in Hong Kong

In September 2019, an artist residence program was officially launched as a collaboration between Times Museum, AIT, and Bethel House. More than 50 artists from all over China applied, and following a joint discussion and final vote, it was decided that ErGao would participate. ErGao utilized his unique artistic language and experience of working collaboratively with diverse groups throughout the residency process. Full of creative significance, this process led to a memorable experience both for AIT, the members of Bethel House, and ErGao himself.

The program was designed to explore the communicative role that art plays in diverse communities, and the possibilities for developing a relationship between contemporary

art, community, and social care. We believe there is a need to create opportunities to rupture situations where art is limited to its own area of communication and effectiveness. Strangely enough, ErGao's residency in Japan took place just as exchanges and communication between countries became difficult as a result of COVID-19. This has led me to give deeper thought to the urgency and foresight of this program. We are facing, or will surely come to face, more situations where non-verbal communication or communication is not possible due to differences in language, culture, viewpoint or ways of thinking.

In such an environment, how will artists and art institutions employ new experiments, ideas, and initiatives to make art and influence society in the future? I believe that the experience and results gained from ErGao's residency will become an important step in answering this question. I also have high expectations for the Japanese artists' visits to China through an ongoing exchange program between the Times Museum and AIT, the experiences the artists will gain in various local institutions and communities, and the collaborative exploration of an effective language for communication born from their experiences.

Freedom Within Constraint

Noriaki Mukaiyachi

Representative director of MC MEDIAN Co., Ltd. and NPO BASE

You seem to have had a very fruitful exchange during your two-week stay at Bethel House, ErGao. I hear that several members are experiencing a sense of loss in your absence.

It is a shame I could not join you in Urakawa during your stay, but my impression from your workshops I attended in Tokyo and other venues was that participants were not simply memorizing and dancing to choreographed movements one would expect from generic dance forms, but something more improvised and mutually creative. For example, when the participant with whom I was paired with grasped my shoulder, I reacted by touching my partner's back. In response, the person turned their body and touched my knees in an unconventional chain that led to movements I could never have conceived of myself.

When one moves freely while constrained by one's response to the movements of another (one's partner), that person is not an obstacle; rather, they act as a teacher of the rich possibilities and expressions born from those very interactions. This is the true essence of human collective activity, don't you think? And so, the expressions on the faces of the participants in the midst of these movements were different from the expressions they show in the regular programs, and I was reminded again of the unique energy they each possess.

What I consistently felt through these workshops was a sense of a "non-normative" environment for non-prescriptive activities. Since there is no rigid "norm (choreographed movements)," the problem of "can/cannot" is fundamentally of no concern. Each can participate in his or her own way. Therefore, there is also no "disability." This was also in your description. The dance floor, you explain, is a free space detached from standpoints, gender and all other social norms.

From the outset, "I" is subordinate to various norms. Sickness and disability are also a type of social norm, wouldn't you agree? And the dance floor might well be the place where the "molds (codes)" for such "norms" are broken.

The "dialogue" we engage in on a daily basis often lapses into disagreement because each of us is bound by our point of view, gender, culture, and various other norms. Communication skill is often talked about, but perhaps this does not signify the ability to talk articulately; rather, it may well signify the ability to emancipate oneself from the restraints of such norms and to transcend disagreement. I think that is what everyone was doing in those workshops.



I would like to express my gratitude to all those who made such a valuable experience possible.

Workshops

Inviting contemporary dance group Sokerissa! as a guest, the participants moved their bodies based on experiences and memories that had impressed ErGao during his stay at Bethel House, and divided into groups to create and perform improvisational dances imagined from photos and episodes each had brought and shared at the workshop. The participants enjoyed discovering how bodily memory forms the “self” through the physicality of others.

Dance Workshop by ErGao

Date: Monday, February 24, 2020

Place: SHIBUYA PARCO 9F Creative Studio GAKU (Shibuya-ku, Tokyo)

Participants: 25 in all age groups

Comments from participants (excerpt)

- I used to think that ‘dance’ requires no words, and it expresses a feeling that is indescribable, so I enjoyed a harmony of the language made with the text, memory, and our body movement. Embracing myself lived to this moment is what I want to do.
- Integrating my memory into others’ feeling and movement created a dance that I never imagined!
- It was my first time to participate in the workshop having with a lot of dialogues.
- To move my body with others was simply fun.

The daycare center Rueca annexed to Hida Clinic has a close relationship with Bethel House, leading daycare members and staff to participate in the workshop. Based on the lively conversation about bathing habits that had taken place beforehand, the participants relaxed their bodies first by picturing themselves soaking in a large bathtub and being given a massage, in addition to doing a warm-up to a song by Michael Jackson. After sharing a video of the *oni* (demon) dance that ErGao had performed at the *Setsubun* event at Bethel House, the participants divided into groups to consider an

original choreography for the lyrics of “Hina Matsuri,” which they then presented in the form of an improvisational dance.

Date: Wednesday, February 26, 2020

Place: Daycare Center Rueca (Nagareyama-city, Chiba)

Participants: 30 members and staff

The body as a Site of Free Movement and Resistance

Yuuki Aoki

(Dancer/Choreographer/Leader of "Newcomer H Sokerissa!")

"I feel that China and Japan are both facing the same situation where technological development is dividing human beings." These are ErGao's words. He also talked about a diminishing sense of the physical in real life. As technological development advances relentlessly in this way, pursuing convenience that sees machines do all the work at the push of a button, I feel that interaction and cooperation between human beings as a means of utilizing the respective qualities of the individual will steadily disappear.

ErGao's workshop was organized around the theme of "connectivity and creativity," the very thing that is being lost. Taking place at GAKU in the Shibuya PARCO building, ErGao invited the Tokyo participants to dance as he showed a video recorded during his stay at Bethel House in Urakawa Town in Hokkaido in which song-loving members dance to "Let It Be" by the Beatles, giving careful consideration to the connection with Hokkaido through bodily experience. The participants also shared with each other photos they had brought to the workshop that depicted familiar memories from the past, making connections between their experiences and creating physical movements out of the associations that were triggered by their memories. From this workshop, I felt an "ideal state" of the individual and group.

In addition, ErGao's workshop at the day care Rueca in Nagareyama City in Chiba prefecture advanced at a particularly nice tempo. I imagine that for people with mental illness, giving priority to sensory physical reactions is an effective means of suppressing thought-centered activities that tend to hold sway in daily life. Organized with an underlying feeling of affection, I am convinced that such a workshop, which does not attempt to attain some perfect ideal through the reformation of the individual, but creates encounters between individuals living their own respective lives while placing value on what is gained solely from such shared experience, creates a space where the participants can move freely with minds at peace.

In the future, physical communication may well become more and more of an exceptional experience. A person I dance with who has experienced living on the street remarked: "Through dance, I have had the opportunity to interact with people who are living regular daily lives." I think it is important to create spaces open to all regardless of circumstances and generation, including people with mental illness, where it becomes commonplace for each to habitually utilize his or her own individuality.

ErGao's approach explained at the beginning is precisely "the body's resistance to fragmentation," and its strength is spectacular when coupled with his purity. Oblivious of genre, such activities are what is sought in a modern world tending to focus on competition.

Programme Partners

Bethel House (Urakawa, Hokkaido)

In 1984, Bethel House officially started in an old church located in Urakawa town in Hokkaido where people with mental disabilities formed a survivor's group outside of the hospital and lived together. As an expert to one's symptoms of Schizophrenia, their philosophy of agony, despair, restoration, and existence shared at the well-known Member Self Study Meeting supports peers to cope with difficulties. The study encourages active participation and openness to share one's deep experiences and weakness that may relate to marginalized social issues. AIT has visited Bethel House to participate in their annual festival as well as a previous lecture in the series of "Art and Social Welfare Lab" that their educational program MAD once presented.

Guangdong Times Museum (Guangzhou, China)

Guangdong Times Museum is a nonprofit institution funded in 2010, Guangzhou, China. Designed by Rem Koolhaas and Alain Fouraux. The different functionalities of Times Museums are distributed over different floors of a residential building, and have become an interweaving structure of everyday life and living space. Guangdong Times Museum initiated Times Art Center Berlin as its parallel institution in Europe lately.

About Arts Initiative Tokyo [AIT]

Arts Initiative Tokyo [AIT] begun by six art curators and organizers in 2001 to create a platform to think about, learn and discuss arts. Registered as a non-profit organization in 2002, AIT continues to cooperate with individuals, companies, foundations and public organizations to share the values of arts through our programs.

In collaboration with various organizations, the recent AIT residency invites artists, curators, writers, and educators with multidisciplinary works and practices to diversify expertise and locations in exploration of a relation between the contemporary arts/culture and issues that require global attention.

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