THE ARTIST AS MIRROR HOLDER

THE "SELF" AND "OTHERS" AS REFLECTIONS IN THE COMMUNITY ART OF DEBE SHAM

By Ho Siu Kee

Hong Kong-based artist Debe Sham shares thoughts on her practice and her latest project, involving youth communities in Connecticut, with artist Ho Siu Kee.

Guang Yuan (2011–12) is one of your earlier works. How did the reflection in a mirror first attract your attention in your art-making? And how did it extend to connect with another work, Lost in the City *(2011–12)?*

I am interested in mirrors, especially old ones. I always feel that a mirror is like a door that opens into time and space. They catch the images of people in the past. Whenever I hold an old mirror, I feel that our images can cross the boundary of time and meet one another. Meeting strangers through a reflection in a mirror gives me a similar feeling. Mirrors seem to have the mystical power to capture one's soul.

In *Guang Yuan*, the mirror holder—myself—and people at the site, as well as those who came to the exhibition, saw different reflections. The sunlight reflected by the mirror entered the eye of the mirror holder, who would squint in response to the strong light. The squinting brought into focus the light source, blurring the existence of the surrounding landscape. When this work is shown in the form of a photograph, what the audience will see is an image composed of myself—the mirror holder and subject of the photograph—and the reflection on the wall. They will think about the relationship between the subject and the venue, imagine the source of the reflection, and wonder if there was a hidden second person.

A mirror presents a strong metaphor. You mentioned that someone in the past and a present version of yourself might have looked into the same mirror, especially if the mirror was an old one that had lived through days and years. This concept about mirror image extends the "self" to "others," and the "others" of course includes the audience of your work. Lost in the City *shows, to some degree, such an extension. Could you say more about this?*

We are so used to the reflective function of mirrors that we are losing our curiosity and imagination about them. *Lost in the City* was my first performance on the street. I knelt in the narrow space of a mirror box and did not move for a long time. The outside of the mirror box reflected the surrounding area. If you looked at the mirror box from a certain angle, it would blend into the environment. As a result, parts of my body hidden in the box seemed to disappear while the exposed parts would meet the gaze of passersby—others. Encounters of "self" and "others" in the same time and space might seem impossible, but this was a strange, shared experience under unusual circumstances.

You have just completed the six-month Yale-China Arts Fellowship. Yale University is located in New Haven, Connecticut, in the United States. Could you discuss the inspiration derived from the people and places there? You finished a project titled "New Haven Green and i" (2017–18). What kind of project was that?

When I first arrived in New Haven, someone told me that it had the characteristics of a "town and gown" community, like many other typical university towns. There is an invisible tension between the university community and the people who live there. In fact, some official figures show that Yale University is a major employer for the New Haven community, which is one of the poorest in the state and even in the country, and has a high rate of juvenile crime. New Haven is also a sanctuary city of the US, and has policies and laws to protect undocumented persons. That is why it has become a place of residence for a lot of Latinos and blacks. Many of them who are homeless just sleep in the park called New Haven Green. Even for those who can move there and integrate into the local community, having any real communication with the Yale students and staff is difficult because of disparities in education levels and social status.

"New Haven Green and i" (NHG & i) was a community public art project. To some extent, the project was my response to the unique "town and gown" social situation in New Haven. As a venue, the park is especially symbolic. "NHG & i" was targeted at primary school students of various races. I believe that children are born with creative power and even at a young age, they have their own views about what happens around them and in the place they live. They may be more direct and honest than adults. Children do not always look for a "correct" answer to questions. They answer questions because of curiosity, not because of a duty to solve the problem. Therefore, answers from children are always creative and will never be boring.

To start a community art project in an unfamiliar place, you must have come across many challenges when building trust in different stakeholders. Could you talk about the concept of "NHG & i"? How did you encourage local people, in particular children, to take part in it?

It all started with New Haven Green. It is a very attractive place to me. It's a beautiful park in the urban area of New Haven, owned by a private body but open to the public. However, local people rarely visit or stay in the park. It is a rather deserted place at night and you will find that only the homeless sleep there. So my idea was to allow people from different races and backgrounds to rebuild communication channels and to connect in this public space through a community art project.

My previous works mainly focused on how interpersonal relationships are established and how people communicate. When related ideas are placed in the context of daily life, it becomes difficult to restage these works in the traditional exhibition spaces of galleries and art museums. New Haven Green is a public space with a unique cultural background, providing me with a starting point to think about what the community actually needs and allowing local people to re-explore what this public space means to them. To me, exploring the subject through the viewpoint, curiosity and creativity of children provides more possibilities. As to your question of motivating them to participate, it's always a good idea to start with games.

Your idea to combine games and public space explains why the final work is related to children's playgrounds. You started the project by explaining to local people the concept behind your works so that you could have their support, then you organized school workshops and explored with children the possibilities of playgrounds as public space. "NHG & i" finally premiered at the International Festival of Arts and Ideas 2017. What were some of the special or memorable moments for you during this process?

I've always been interested in the subject of games and playgrounds. *Rainbow Series I* (2013–14) and *Rainbow Series II* (2015) are my recent works on this subject. As for what impressed me during the development of "NHG & i," I think it's what I saw when visiting the local primary schools. In general, the teacher-student relationship in the schools is good. The teachers give their students the freedom to read, play and experiment with innovative ideas, and they emphasize collaboration and interaction between students. I remember that in one of the schools, a teacher reserved a space called "children's concern" on the blackboard so that students could write down the issues they would like to discuss that week. When I visited, someone had written "Queue-jumping is a serious problem of the class!" on the board.

Children have their own views about equality and justice, and they also express directly and strongly what concerns them in the environment. Did this move you to study the park as a public space and the local issues arising from it?

The children always surprised me in the "NHG & i" workshops. I told them the history of the Green so they could once again learn about the place, which was already, in fact, familiar to them. Through discussions and various kinds of interactive exchange, we explored what we could possibly do for the space together. In the end, the children were divided into groups and each group would design a public artwork. After the workshop at each school, I would invite students and teachers for experience sharing, where the children could talk about the ideas of their works. I was so happy to see that more than half of the 40 work models were centered around the topic of homeless people. Works such as *The Wishing Tree, The Great Big Tent of New Haven* and *The Play Museum* were full of the children's emotional narrative of the places around them. They were very sensitive to the Green as a public space. What and whom they cared about were important to the conception of my final work for the International Festival of Arts & Ideas 2017.
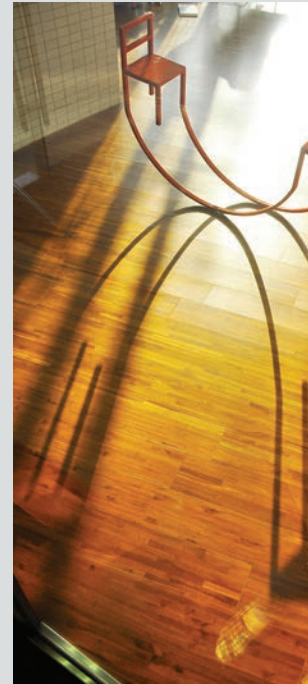
(Top left)
DEBE SHAM, *Rainbow Series I – the Orange Rocking Chair*, 2014, steel, dimensions variable.

(Top right)
Installation view of **DEBE SHAM**'s *Rainbow Series II* (2015).

(Center left)
Student participants discussing community projects with **DEBE SHAM** in a workshop in Davis Street Arts and Academics School, New Haven.

(Center right)
Visitors interacting with *The Wishing Tree* (2017) installation at Edgewood Magnet School in New Haven.

(Bottom right)
Aerial view of New Haven Green with four site-specific installations presented as part of the community project "New Haven Green & i".

From workshops and models made by the children, to the larger work displayed at the park for the International Festival of Arts & Ideas 2017, which involved public participation, what role did you, as an artist, play in the process? Were there differences between your original concept and the final work?

My first concern was the need to help the audience understand the children's works and the ideas behind them. Attracting public attention can be difficult, and this is where the support of an artist is needed. In light of this, I tried to find various interesting and interactive ways to present the children's works. In the end, I chose those proposed by four groups of children and made enlarged versions of those works. These larger versions would allow children to stand and play inside them. In this way, the children's ideas were turned into objects that more children could experience. We had started out by connecting people, then explored the possibilities offered by an outdoor public space and, gradually, we changed the atmosphere in the community. We turned the Green into a space where more people would like to stay and share. All of these ideas are closely related to my previous practice, but I think I was more like a facilitator in this project. This is also the role I have assigned myself in community art.

When it comes to differences from my original concept, I would say that there were some nice surprises along the way. When we installed the works at the park, some homeless people came to help us, and I took the chance to explain to them the ideas of the works. They were excited to learn that I, as an outsider, and the local children cared about their situation. Their responses made me feel that the works were meaningful.

In a community art project, motivating local people to take part in the project is always a big challenge to the artist or, as you call it, the facilitator. It is really an achievement that you were able to enable participation for "NHG & i." How did the children react to their work being exhibited?

"NHG & i" was a community art project, so more participation from the local community is always good. The children played an active role in this respect. During the International Festival of Arts & Ideas 2017, many children who had taken part in the workshops came to the exhibition with their parents. They would tell their parents about their experience in the project, explaining to them the incentives for taking part in the second round of on-site community engagement. In this way, "NHG & i" then extended from the children to the adult community. To enhance their involvement, I designed a second stage for the game. I put up a working tabletop at the exterior of each of the four works. I also created thousands of square, round and triangular wooden parts, each painted in bright colors and featuring pierced holes. During the festival period, parents and their children could assemble these wooden parts into different forms and tie them to the four outdoor playground-like installations, adding more and more vitality and color to the works. The children who had taken part in the workshops were all very happy to see their ideas grow continuously.

Your early works used a mirror and its reflection as a metaphor to explore the interaction of "self" and "others" in urban spaces. From that to your role as a facilitator in "NHG & i" to study specific social issues, I can see that you in fact have remained a mirror holder. The only difference is that recently, you allowed the artist and stakeholders of the community to meet and interact in the specific time and space reflected by the "mirror of community art" you held. As a young artist, you have worked hard to expand your horizon and have provided us with many new surprises. I am really looking forward to your solo exhibition at 1a space, Hong Kong, in October this year.

Translated by Teresa Chan.

Debe Sham is a visual artist and the Yale-China HKETO-NY Arts Fellow 2017.

Ho Siu Kee is associate professor at the Department of Fine Arts at The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

(Top)
Installation view of *The Homeless Shelter*, 2017, in New Haven Green, 2017, with students from Christopher Columbus Academy, New Haven.

(Center)
Students from the John C. Daniels School interacting with *The Great Big Tent of New Haven*, 2017, in New Haven Green, 2017.

(Bottom)
Detail of an artwork as part of the "New Haven Green & i" project, 2017–18.