

Qiu Zhijie's self-conception as an artist – doing art in a critical historical and transcultural perspective

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Qiu Zhijie's claim that 'art must transform life'¹ is at the heart of his self-conception as an artist. Particularly in the context of his concept of *Total Art*² that he has been articulating since 2003, but also in earlier works, the artist has long stated that art for him is a way to change reality. He views reality as a continuous transformational process, which he is consciously aware of being a part of.³ It is against this background that he sees his social and aesthetic responsibility as an artist to practice art as a tool to critically interact in transformational processes of reality, and it is in this context that he understands art and reality as tightly entangled.⁴ In order to be able to effectively act on and at the same time critically situate oneself in the transformational processes of reality, Qiu Zhijie, in his multiple roles as artist, curator, teacher and art critic⁵, emphasizes art's obligation to 'connect'⁶ with reality

¹ 艺术必须要改变生活 see: Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 12 March 2014), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

² 总体艺术

³ According to Qiu this awareness of the processual nature of reality – the impermanence of life including one's own – is central to Chinese thinking and is related to a specific sensibility of death. Because there is death, people are aware of life's transient nature: 'Life is as transient as a fleeting cloud; life is but a dream, indeed thinking this way is part of our experiences. The most important Chinese works of literature are devoted to this subject matter. For example *A Dream of Red Mansion* describes things fading away, how everything grand and thieving eventually perishes. It seems Chinese people are extremely sensitive to this sense of impermanence.' Qiu Zhijie in, 'Fleeting Clouds - A Dialogue between Jerome Sans and Qiu Zhijie', Jérôme Sans; Guo Xiaoyan, ed, *Qiu Zhijie. Breaking the Ice*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2009, 12.

As will be explained below, Qiu's concept of reality as process and his understanding of a de-centered subject entangled in specific (power-) structures of reality is also informed by post-structuralism.

⁴ Qiu explains that the emphasis placed on the cultivation of relations, such as the 'significance of filial piety and family' can be understood in the context of a heightened awareness of life's transient nature. I argue that it is in this context that he formulates and reflects on his own social responsibilities as an artist. See, Qiu Zhijie in 'Fleeting Clouds - A Dialogue between Jerome Sans and Qiu Zhijie', Jérôme Sans; Guo Xiaoyan, ed, *Qiu Zhijie. Breaking the Ice*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2009, 12.

⁵ On Qiu Zhijie's different roles see, Cheng, Meiling, 'De/visualizing Calligraphic Archaeology. Qiu Zhijie's Total Art', *The Drama Review*, 53: 2; Summer 2009: 20 and Guo

that, in his understanding, encompasses present society as well as history. To articulate this practice of connecting, he adopts the notion of self-cultivation⁷, which has long been central to the social, cultural, and art histories of China.⁸

The concerns of this paper are twofold. On the basis of artworks as well as written sources, I will first explain Qiu Zhijie's interest in art as self-cultivation and in art as a transformational practice of connecting. Introducing him as a contemporary Chinese artist transculturally entangled in global contemporary art discourses, a focus will be placed on the following questions: how and why he articulates historical and cultural connections; what are the differences between the historical understanding of art as self-cultivation and Qiu Zhijie's contemporary concept; what are the issues of art as transformational practice that the artist regards as having specific critical relevance. Second, the paper introduces the artist as a critical historiographer. Based on his artworks and texts, I will examine how he positions himself in the context of contemporary Chinese art history writing as well as in relation to discourses of global contemporaneity, understood as a 'disjunctive temporal and spatial coming together in the present'.⁹

Self-cultivation then and now

The notion of self-cultivation and the related concept of art as a transformational practice of identification has been an important topos in Chinese art history,¹⁰

Xiaoyan, 'Six Things about Qiu Zhijie', Jérôme Sans; Guo Xiaoyan, ed, *Qiu Zhijie. Breaking the Ice*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2009, 17.

⁶ 贯通, see: Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers,

<http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 12 March 2014), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

⁷, (...) I believe all art is self-cultivation(...) (我相信任何艺术首先都是一种修行): 邱志杰在日本作访问艺术家时答记者问, 李豫闽(者), *當代藝術與本土文化。邱志傑* (Contemporary Art and Cultural Transformation. Qiu Zhi Jie), 福州: 福建美術出版社, 2004, 163.

⁸ Concepts of self-cultivation play an important role in Daoism, Buddhism and most prominently in

in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. On the topic of self-cultivation see for example: Schmücker, Marcus; Heubel, Fabian, ed., *Dimensionen der Selbstkultivierung. Beiträge des Formus für Asiatische Philosophie*, Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Albers Freiburg/München, 2013.

With respect to Chinese art Tu Wei-ming has referred to Xu Fuguan who has stated that 'Confucians and Taoists share the belief that self-cultivation is basic to artistic creativity'. Tu Wei-ming, 'The Idea of the Human in Mencian Thought: An Approach to Chinese Aesthetics', Susan Bush; Christian Murck, eds., *Theories of the Arts in China*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, 57-73.

⁹ Osborne, Peter, *Anywhere or not at all. Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London: Verso, 2013, 17.

¹⁰ Billeter, Jean Francois, *The Chinese Art of Writing*, New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1990, 157-202, Obert, Mathias, 'Leibliche Mimesis und Selbstsorge in den chinesischen Künsten des Pinsels', Schmücker, Marcus; Heubel, Fabian, ed., *Dimensionen der Selbstkultivierung. Beiträge des Formus für Asiatische Philosophie*, Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Albers Freiburg/München, 2013, 396-426.

especially with regards to calligraphy and the literati artist. It is through conceptual enactments of calligraphy that Qiu Zhijie has been critically re-considering art as self-cultivation and art's obligation to transformation from a contemporary perspective.¹¹ For *Copying the Preface of the Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion a Thousand Times* (1990-1995) (Ill.1), Qiu Zhijie chose to copy one of the most famous canonical calligraphy artworks in China, the *Preface of the Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion* (Lanting Xu)¹² by Wang Xizhi (303–361 AD).¹³ Beginning in 1990¹⁴ he repeatedly wrote Wang Xizhi's calligraphy not on separate pieces but on the same sheet of paper over a period of five years until 1997. As a result of the layering of the scripts, nothing was legible anymore – instead the paper had turned into a black monochrome image. When exhibiting the artwork, Qiu Zhijie displays the relic of the performance: the black image as well as a video documentation of the performance.

In Chinese art history, practicing calligraphy and copying old masters like Wang Xizhi and his canonic masterpiece the *Preface of the Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion* (Lanting Xu) has been regarded a form of self-cultivation. The copying of artworks is a practice of bodily, intellectually and emotionally identifying with and relating to the corporeal traces of the artistic author and to the aesthetic and ethical values embodied in the artwork. It is through such performative enactments, that is through self-cultivation, that the copying artist as well as the receiver take part in reality's transformational processes, of which art history as mediated by a specific artist is a part of. And it is in this regard that the copying artist as well as every receiver of the artwork transforms and consequently re-constitutes his or herself according to these experiences of identification that are experiences of participating in a certain reality. To connect and to identify with a specific art history mediated through artworks produced by fellow persons is a mode of self-cultivating oneself not only as an artist, but also as a human being. In other words, self-cultivation is a practice of continuous interrelations between human beings, history and reality. The enactment of artworks has the function to guarantee (art-) history's continuity. Moreover it serves the purpose to keep the ongoing process of transformation that is reality, and oneself as a part of reality, alive.

¹¹ Guo Xiaoyan, 'Impermanent Brushstrokes. On Writing and Memories', Jérôme Sans; Guo Xiaoyan, ed., *Qiu Zhijie. Breaking the Ice*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2009, 115. Cheng, Meiling, 2009, 20.

¹² 兰亭集序

¹³ Wang Xizhi was especially famous for his semi-cursive script. His calligraphy has been greatly admired and he has been called a sage of calligraphy (书圣). Before the 18th century, when scholars questioned the master narrative by referring to antique scripts, it was the Wang style that dominated the canon of calligraphy in Chinese art history.

¹⁴ Cheng, Meiling, 'De/visualizing Calligraphic Archaeology. Qiu Zhijie's Total Art', *The Drama Review*, 53: 2; Summer 2009: 33. *The Preface of the Orchid Pavilion* is often dated to 1990-1995, but Qiu Zhijie himself corrected the dates to 1990-1997 in a conversation with Meiling Cheng.

This understanding of self-cultivation is not autonomous and individualistic, but based on an interrelational concept of the self.¹⁵ The self is conceptualised as being constituted by interrelations with the social sphere: first to the family, then to society and the country as well as to history and the cosmos. It is against this background that self-cultivation can be understood as the quest for interrelatedness.¹⁶ By relating to society, history and the world with its concomitant values and according to specific aesthetic and social conventions, art as a self-cultivation practice not only serves the individual but the collective good; in so far as it mediates and guarantees interrelationality as the necessary quality for art to function as a medium to ensure the continuity of history, as well as the preservation of harmonious social conditions that ensure the transformational processes of reality.

To effectively practice self-cultivation through art means to transform oneself in interrelation to reality, for collective benefit demands for artworks to be receivable by the audience not only as articulations but also mediums for self-cultivation. Since the mediating quality of the artwork is at the centre of successful self-cultivation, the artist has to fulfil a mediating role that requires him/her to be knowledgeable of specific conventions of art as well as of aesthetics and history in order to be able to speak a 'language' his audience can understand and relate to. As will be explained in detail further below, Qiu Zhijie critically reflects on this mediating role, historically attributed to the literati artist, from the perspective of a contemporary experimental artist by radically questioning the conventional legibility of a calligraphic artwork.

Historically, on a phenomenological level, in order for the artwork to be effective in the performative acts of interrelational and transformational processes of self-cultivation, it must be transformational itself. In other words, it must be open and temporalised. The *Lanting Xu* by Wang Xizhi is a paradigmatic example in this respect. The semi-cursive, fluid and spontaneous ductus as well as the crossing out of characters due to revisions are not only owed to improvisation and writing the piece on site, but also articulations of immediacy and the autopoietic aesthetic principle *ziran*¹⁷ that is an articulation as much as a mediation of the Daoist concept of reality and the world as transformational process. Through the enactment of these aspects of temporalisation, self-cultivation succeeds as an interrelational and transformational practice of identification. It is only in a temporal structure of continuous change that artist and viewer are able to experience, participate in and unite with the transformational event of reality as it is embodied in artworks and history.

¹⁵ Tu Wei-ming describes this concept of the self as 'at the centre of relationships'. Tu Weiming, 'Embodying the Universe: A Note on Confucian Self-Realization', Ames, T. Roger; Wimal Dissanayake; Thomas P. Kasulis, eds., *Self as Person In Asian Theory and Practice*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994, 180.

¹⁶ Vinograd, Richard, *Boundaries of the Self: Chinese Portraits 1600-1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 5.

¹⁷ 自然

To explain the *Lanting Xu's* aesthetic quality of *ziran* and its nature of interrelationality and consonance¹⁸ respectively, it is helpful to sketch out the historical context from which it arose. It was during the Spring Purification Festival in the year 353 AD that forty-one literati scholars gathered to get drunk and write poems together. Wang Xizhi was appointed to be in charge of writing the preface for the anthology of poems created that day. In his writing he describes the gathering, the weather and the geographical setting. The calligraphy embodies in both form and content¹⁹ the experience of not only being part of a social group gathering but also of communally participating in the transformational event, the transformational process that is reality – experiences of community and transcendence that were heightened by the consumption of alcohol.²⁰ The artwork's temporal structure of presence has to be understood against the background of the Daoist concept of reality as ephemeral – as a transformational event and autopoetical process. The continuous presentness of a reality that encompasses past, present and future is perceived and ensured through various practices of interrelating, such as self-cultivating practices by artists, who generate reality in themselves through the enactment of art. It is in this context that Wang Xizhi's calligraphic traces are not indexical to a completed event in the past but embodiments of the artist's interrelational participation in the transformative process of reality. In consequence, this means that the receiver of the *Lanting Xu* does not re-enact experiences of Wang Xizhi. Instead, through her/his bodily enactment she/he becomes part of the gathering at the Orchid pavilion that through the enactment of the artwork is still going on in the present. Based on his own experiences of engaging in artworks by former generations of artists, Wang Xizhi, like many literati artists in general, were convinced that their artworks would be received and enacted by future audiences:

Chinese literati artists always see traces of the future in themselves – we become history. This sentiment is similar to the inscriptions on scrolls of Chinese calligraphy and paintings. The notation documents the authenticity of the work, but it is also a testament to the individuals whose presence can be felt through the traces left behind in the work. One could say that it is like

¹⁸ 'For it [*Lanting Xu*] is the first considered statement on the application of Zhuangzi's doctrine of consonance with the cosmic principle to the contemplation of hills and streams (...)', Minford, John; Joseph S.M. Lau, ed., *An Anthology of Translations. Classical Chinese Literature, Volume 1 From Antiquity to the Tang Dynasty*, New York and Hong Kong: Columbia University Press and the Chinese University Press Hong Kong, 2000, 479.

¹⁹ Translation into English see: Minford, John; Joseph S.M. Lau, ed. *An Anthology of Translations. Classical Chinese Literature, Volume 1 From Antiquity to the Tang Dynasty*, New York and Hong Kong: Columbia University Press and the Chinese University Press Hong Kong, 2000, 480-482.

²⁰ Wang Xizhi was known to be drunk at the moment of his composition. He was literally 'inspired' and merged with his task of writing (神来之笔). I am thanking Meiling Cheng for pointing this aspect out to me.

a banquet that keeps growing with an influx of visitors; all those who remain behind mingle with the newcomers and thus are memories passed on.²¹

It is in this regard that the receiver of the *Lanting Xu* becomes a participant, an additional visitor of the gathering as Gao Shiming put it. Together with her/his fellow receivers in the present, the past and the future, she/he 'shares' the same experience of interrelation in the continuous presence of change that is reality.

It is against this background that Qiu Zhijie's enactment of the *Lanting Xu* can be considered a critique of calligraphy as self-cultivation. He reflects on art's obligation and claim to act as an interrelational medium and the related aesthetic and social functions attributed to such a concept of art as self-cultivation. From the perspective of a contemporary experimental artist²² he not only critically engages with the mediating role historically attributed to the traditional conception of the literati artist, but also with the claim to create open artworks as a precondition for them to effectively act in interrelational practices of self-cultivation and reality's transformational processes respectively.

By writing the *Preface of the Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion* a thousand times and over a time span of seven years, Qiu Zhijie, like a traditional literati artist practices art as self-cultivation. Qiu Zhijie is connecting with Wang Xizhi's way of writing as an embodiment of the artist's bodily constitution and related aesthetic and moral values, and also inscribes himself in the calligraphic canon related to Wang Xizhi. As Meiling Cheng has explained it

[Qiu Zhijie] locates his own creativity in the paradoxical plenitude that comes from restriction. A calligrapher trains by mastering a relatively unchanged set of tools – a brush pen, an ink stick, an ink stone, and an absorbent role of paper – and by imitating classic brush writing models. Only through years of painstaking imitation can a calligrapher mature in his/her craft.²³

²¹ Gao Shiming, 'Impermanence – Interpreting Qiu Zhijie (An Excerpt),' Jérôme Sans; Guo Xiaoyan ed., Qiu Zhijie. *Breaking the Ice*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2009, 119.

²² In the year 2005, as one of the curators of 'The Second Triennial of Chinese Art: Archaeology of the Future 2005' in Nanjing Qiu Zhijie gave a definition of experimental art which is fruitful to consider in the context of this paper: 'Today, to express the habit of reflection has become the main thing people require of art, and it is the phase for experimental art. The artist and his/her relationship with art are also part of today's observation of art. Art shouldn't be treated as a naturally mastered tool. Instead artistic behaviour should be considered as a kind of narrative, that is to say, a kind of remains from the archaeological study of the future. Through this sort of remains and the cohabitation of all kinds of remains, we are able to construct an imagination of ourselves as cultural accumulation and sedimentation. When one studies the culture of archaeology he /she must pay attention to the concomitant relationship among all sorts of remains and between the remains and the relics. This kind of coexistent relations make up the culture in pre-historical archaeology, which is termed archaeological culture.' Qiu Zhijie, Zuo Jing, Zhu Tong, *The Second Triennial of Chinese Art: Archaeology of the Future 2005*, Nanjing: Hubei Fine Arts Publishing House (Wuhan - China), 2005, 15.

²³ Cheng, Meiling 2009, 20.

But there are also major differences between Qiu Zhijie's and traditional enactments of Wang Xizhi's masterpiece. On the one hand, Qiu Zhijie sticks to the epistemology of calligraphy that can be summarised as a practice of inscribing as a mode of interrelating. By Meiling Cheng's definition, this is '(1) to search for consistent methodology rather than for particular style; (2) to access worldly phenomena as calligraphic scripts, ready to inscribed'.²⁴

On the other hand, Qiu Zhijie radically re-thinks and re-interprets the obligation of art as a medium of interrelation. By copying Wang Xizhi's handwriting, he relates his own practice to the latter artist, to a specific Chinese art history narrative and the Daoist worldview embodied in the *Lanting Xu*. As opposed to traditional enactments however, his practice of interrelation does not aim at legibility. The audience is confronted with an indecipherable black monochrome image – the relic of repetitive overwriting. As has been explained above, traditional literati artists felt responsible and obliged to share their experiences of engaging with history and reality with the audience in order to ensure continuity. In Qiu Zhijie's case, at least from a conventional point of view, the audience is excluded from his experiences of interrelating with history and reality. His practice of interrelation is not traceable by others. On the one hand, this can be understood as a mode of personal introspection and identification with Chinese art history. On the other hand, this does not mean that he disclaims art's social responsibilities. He still is committed to art's obligation to the collective benefit of society, but suggests a critical re-thinking of its conventional function and modes of implementation. In this regard, Qiu Zhijie's concern is to instigate an awareness of how subjectivities are constructed within certain power structures inherent in specific practices of interrelating. By changing the temporal structure of the artwork from processual to enclosed time, he also changes the structure of spectatorship, that is the dispositive of how to relate and to generate one's self in turn. Different from the receiver of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy who generates her-/himself in dynamic interrelations, as a relational participant of the artwork that embodies reality's continuous presence as transformational event, Qiu Zhijie's interpretation does not embody and therefore does not enable the recipient to participate in the transformational processes of reality. The monochrome black 'image' is devoid of the temporal structure of presence – the presence of continuous change that constitutes reality conceptualised as a transformational event. Her/his self is not generated through relational processes of participation and unification but is constituted in a dualistic relation outside of, and distanced from, the artwork. By negating the conventional quality of mediality necessary for the process of self-cultivation it seems to be Qiu Zhijie's intention to provoke the audience to analyse and critically reflect upon her/his interrelations with oneself, the world, reality, history, one's family, culture etc. in which she/he generates and receives her-/himself as part of reality.

It is against this background that Qiu Zhijie's relationship to Chinese art history and the concept of the literati artist can be called ambiguous. On the one hand he not only holds the art of calligraphy in high esteem by referring to the master narrative of Chinese calligraphy but also - not only in his interpretation of

²⁴ Cheng, Meiling 2009, 20.

the *Lanting Xu* but in his practice of art in general - emphasises the necessity for historical research in contemporary art. On the other hand he radically questions the power structures inherent in certain historical narratives and discloses their constructedness as manmade. When exhibiting the artwork, Qiu Zhijie displays the relic of the performance (the black image) as well as a video of the performance, ergo juxtaposing two different structures of time and spectatorship accordingly: a representation of embodied time with the temporalised documentation of the performance. The re-temporalisation of the static black image in the exhibition presentation can also be understood as an articulation of his 'Daosim and Buddhism-inspired syncretic philosophy regarding human history' as a strategy of critiquing history writing as a practice of implementing political power by pointing to the impermanent nature of reality, history and human beings: 'Despite the great power that an emperor might attain, his political ambition, like his mortal body, cannot last forever. In contrast, nature's effortless vitality ever sustains itself through perpetual renewal, like the fragrance from the Nanmu tree'.²⁵

Western and Chinese art history in critical historical and transcultural perspective

In a transcultural perspective, Qiu Zhijie's critique of art as an interrelational practice of self-cultivation can at the same time be seen as a critique of representational art -- both in relation to its narrative of rejection in Chinese art history²⁶ as well as in relation to Western art history, in which the representational function of art has been a central issue.

Annihilating the readable text as well as the traces of the brush through the repetitive layering of black ink can be understood as a critique of art's obligation to enact interrelational mediality and transformation in order to guarantee continuity. On the one hand, he critiques literati art's presumed relationship to the past as an authoritarian medium that demands integration, not only in a specific historiography but also in a specific order of how to generate oneself in relation to history and reality respectively.

On the other hand, the act of re-temporalising the representational image by exhibiting the relic of the performance can also be regarded as a critique of Western art history as institutionalised by the museum and its related dispositive of representational objectification. By stating that: 'once calligraphy is represented in the museum it isn't art anymore'²⁷, Qiu Zhijie seems to emphasise art's

²⁵ Cheng, Meiling, 'Dappled China: "Untamed Histories"'. Surrounding the China Brand', *Yishu. Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 11, No. 4, July/August 2012, 54.

²⁶ In literati art, formal likeness' (形似) was considered inferior to the resonance of *qi* (气韵). Most famous in this regard is Su Shi's (1037-1101) poem: 'If anybody discusses paintings in terms of formal likeness, his understandings is nearly that of a child'. Cua, Antonio S., ed., *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*, New York, London: Routledge, 2003, 513.

²⁷ '说文解字作为一种生活 - 舒可文对邱志杰的访谈', 李豫闽 (出版者), *当代艺术本土文化。邱志杰* (Contemporary Art and Cultural Transformation. Qiu Zhijie), 福州: 福建美術出版社, 2004, 8.

ineffectiveness once it is subdued in the classical museological order of an art museum. Here, the spectator stays in dualistic opposition to the artwork. Calligraphy's mediating and interrelational quality that demands to be maintained through practices of copying and the adding of commentaries is lost, and with it, the potential for actively and bodily participating in writing history and building communities through collaborative practices that take place in the present – such as during former gatherings of literati artists as for example at the Orchid Pavilion²⁸ -- as well as in the past by enacting writings of older masters.²⁹

From a philosophical perspective, it seems that Qiu Zhijie understands art as a tool to raise the consciousness of how specific structures constitute our perceptions and experiences of ourselves in the world and our actions in turn.³⁰ Furthermore he attempts to thematise how different concepts of art, their related dispositives of experience and acting – which I suggest can be articulated by self-cultivation as cultural technique – have been constructed by specific institutional frames and historical narratives. Referring to Dorothea von Hantelmann, I propose to understand Qiu Zhijie's artworks as 'spaces of experience'.³¹ Von Hantelmann coined this term to describe a 'specific type of installation that not only represents objects, but presents them as directed/oriented towards the recipient actions – imagined or taking place for real. In this regard these spaces present not only a spatial but also temporal structure.'³² By engaging the audience in experiencing different structures of experience and their effects on one's understanding and acting in the world, the 'aesthetic experience of the space of experience is enacted in

²⁸ The 'Literati Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion' (353 AD) can be considered a paradigmatic participatory social event in Chinese art history, where artists created and enjoyed art collaboratively. The *Lanting Xu* by Wang Xizhi is a poem about this meeting.

²⁹ Wang Meiling has emphasized that the difference between Qiu Zhijie and other socially engaged artists like for example Joseph Beuys ist hat Qiu not only interacts with his contemporaries but also with his fellows in the past. Cheng, Meiling, 2009, 20.

³⁰ This approach of deconstruction is informed by post-structuralism. As a mode of de-ideologisation, it has been deployed by Qiu Zhijie as early as the 1990s, especially with respect to his video works. Qiu Zhijie; Wu Meichun, 'The Rise and Development of Video Art and the Maturity of New Media Art', Wu Hung, Feng Boyi, Wang Huangsheng, eds., *The First Guangzhou Triennial. Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990-2000)*, Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002, 51-59.

³¹ 'Erfahrungsraum', von Hantelmann, Dorothea, 'Erfahrungsraum', Schaffaff, Jörn et al., *Kunst – Begriffe der Gegenwart. Von Allegorie bis Zip*, Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2013, 67-71.

³² 'Erfahrungsraum', von Hantelmann, Dorothea, 'Erfahrungsraum', Schaffaff, Jörn et al., *Kunst – Begriffe der Gegenwart. Von Allegorie bis Zip*, Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2013, 67-68: 'Künstler und Künstlerinnen wie Dominique Gonzales-Foerster oder Carsten Höller schaffen künstlerische Erfahrungsräume, die einen besonderen Typus von Installationen darstellen, insofern in ihnen nicht nur Objekte präsentiert werde, sondern sie auf angedachte oder tatsächlich stattfindende Handlungsvollzüge hin orientiert sind; folglich Räume, die eine nicht nur räumliche sondern auch (implizite oder explizite) zeitliche Struktur aufweisen.'

time; as an entering and exiting from the experience, as an interplay between participation and distance, immersion and reflection.'³³

While the result of the *Lanting Xu* performance, the black image, is constituted and constitutes a 'cultural technique of distance, reflection and critique, that is related to the history of the modern exhibition space'³⁴ rooted in Western art history, the re-temporalisation of the black image through video changes the connection of the viewer to the artwork from a distanced to a participatory relation. This can be understood in relation to the history of performativity in Chinese art history and to the history of post-modern deconstructions of representational and object-centred art in Euro-American narratives.

Another example of how Qiu Zhijie critically reflects upon the effects of different concepts of art and their respective structures of experience in generating and constructing specific notions of self and spectatorship can be found in his *Light-Calligraphy Series*. Here, Qiu Zhijie substitutes the brush for a flashlight. During dark nights, at different and often historically or politically charged places in the world, he practices 'light-calligraphy' – writing Chinese characters with a flashlight in the air. Through the medium of long-exposure photography, he records the otherwise invisible traces of his torch-brush. By 'translating' calligraphy into photography, the conflict of two different ways of connecting with the world, and ergo two different time structures inherent in these media, become immediately manifest. While the representational media of photography freezes and contains certain moments of time that happened in the past, calligraphy's structure of temporalisation is one of presence and immediacy that encourages or even demands participation. In the photograph *It changed (Yan'an)* Qiu Zhijie chose to write the words 'it changed' (*bian le*)³⁵ at Yan'an – a specific historical place closely connected to Mao Zedong and the initiation of the Communist party where Mao Zedong gave his famous talks on literature and art in 1942. On the one hand, 'it changed' seems to be a comment on the fact that things, and perhaps specifically also the understanding and functions of art, have been changing. On the other hand the work seems to comment on the ability of photography to represent the documentation of an event and to store time. The viewer of the photograph is reminded of Yan'an and its history. The representational time structure of photography keeps him/her in a different time zone than the scene depicted; different from the moment the artist enacts the calligraphy. The viewer is not able to reconcile in the present the experience of Qiu Zhijie writing '*bian le*' at Yan'an but instead positions her-/himself outside of it, which in effect constitutes the viewer in a distanced relationship to the artwork as well as to the past.

I argue that the analysis of one's situatedness in specific epistemological, institutional and historical structures is Qiu Zhijie's main concern as an artist. His

³³ (...) ästhetische Erfahrung des Erfahrungsraumes vollzieht sich in der Zeit; als ein Ein- und Austreten aus der Erfahrung, als Wechselspiel von Teilhabe und Distanz, von Immersion und Reflexion'. von Hantelmann, 2013, 71.

³⁴ (...) Kulturtechniken der Distanz, Reflexion und Kritik, die mit der Genese des modernen Ausstellungskonzeptes verbunden sind'. von Hantelmann, 2013, 71.

³⁵ 变了

contemporary concept of art as self-cultivation that he fully develops in the context of his concept of 'total art' has to be understood in this regard.

Self-cultivation as a critical practice

The concept of 'total art'³⁶ that Qiu Zhijie sometimes also refers to as 'connected art'³⁷ has been formulated under the premise of art being tightly intertwined with life. According to Qiu Zhijie, social reality is a relational system generated through dynamic relationships. The artist and art as a cultural practice are entangled in these relationships and at the same time also produce new relationships. It is against this background that in Qiu Zhijie's opinion, art per se has to be considered social practice.³⁸

What we need is actually an art that is related to free choice and the possibilities afforded by opening [to the world]. Total art would then be art without controls, or, that is to say, open art. Its objective is to connect individual practice with social responsibility; to link unrestrained fantasy with reality, to link labour with creation, and to connect everyday life with the barriers to art. Thus an even more accurate phrase would be: Connected art.³⁹

The series of interventions and artworks *A Suicidology of the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge* brings to fore how Qiu Zhijie self-conceptualises himself as an artist. That is, as somebody who does art as a self-cultivating practice of connecting (*guantong*: going through, connecting). To practice *guantong* through art for Qiu Zhijie means to analyse relationships in the real world in order to change them.

The term 'total art' and the emphasis on practicing art as a means of connection is chosen on the assumption that every living being and thing in the

³⁶ In order to avoid misunderstanding, Qiu clarifies the meaning of 'total art' as follows: 'The word "total" of total art is also the root of totalitarianism. Totalitarian rulers were often extreme idealists, as well. Totalitarianism was brought about through the ideal of remoulding every layer of life and, since moral introspection did not come into play, this expanded into the violence of an unassailable domination. The similarity of these usages does not appear so very glorious. What we need is actually an art that is related to free choice and the possibilities afforded by opening [to the world].' Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 12 March 2014),, translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

³⁷ 贯通艺术

³⁸ 'We are already in the midst of a social reality; each of our connections is intimately interwoven with social reality. In this extreme sense, one could say that there is no art that does not intervene or participate [in social reality], thus I will not discuss intervention or participation.' Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 2014/3), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

³⁹ Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 2014/3), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

world constitutes itself in interrelation to one another. According to Qiu, 'total art' is social critique, and through critical reflection upon the conditions it is constituted by, it aims to transform life.⁴⁰

Through the transformation of art, language is simultaneously transformed. Through the transformation of language, the self is transformed, as is the entire world. From the point of view of total art, every object, every person, and every event is intimately tied to the entirety of the world, as a mutual constitution. Consequently, this is called total art. Ultimately, total art is the means by which human beings and the world evolve.⁴¹

In the context of 'total art' *A Suicidology of the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge* is conceptualised as social and historical critique on the one hand and as a social intervention on the other. As an intervention on the Nanjing Bridge as well as articulated in different media in exhibitions, this series of works examines the history of the Nanjing Bridge as a national symbol of the Peoples Republic of China in connection to its recent reality as a site of a large number of suicides. The meaning of the Nanjing Bridge as constituted in our current reality is analysed and possibly transformed through interventions in real life by connecting it to the past, official politics and ideology, to daily life, personal biographies, death, and to discourses on art's relationship to life. It comprises site-specific interventions on the Nanjing Bridge and in a local non-governmental institution of suicide prevention, as well as different media presented in the exhibition context such as installations, performances, photographs, paintings and ink.⁴²

For the performance *Where is the capital of Madagascar?*, an intervention on the actual Nanjing Bridge, Qiu Zhijie wiped off the supposed last words written in blood by a person who quite possibly committed suicide in order to leave a message himself. Instead of 'Love is dead. All that [is] left is void' he re-wrote, using his blood, the words, "where is the capital of Madagascar?" This radically socially engaged art illustrates the existential expectations Qiu Zhijie has concerning art and its efficacy to not only critically reflect but literally intervene in social reality, in

⁴⁰ 'Because it emerges from within the system, its ultimate aim is to return to the system, to change it. Thus it has a social character. Effective art creation is at the same time a form of social critique. As its aim is to transform the system, it must be interwoven with everyday life even as art is other than everyday life. Art must transform life.' Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 2014/3), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

⁴¹ 'From the point of view of total art, every object, every person, and every event is intimately tied to the entirety of the world, as a mutual constitution. Consequently, this is called total art. Ultimately, total art is the means by which human beings and the world evolve.' 'Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 12 March 2014), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

⁴² Exhibitions have been taking place in Shanghai, Beijing and Berlin: 2008: *Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi - A Suicidology of The Nanjing Yangzi River Bridge*, Zendai Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, 2009: Qiu Zhijie: *Breaking Through the Ice*, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2009: *Twilight of the Idols*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

order to transform it. Qiu Zhijie encourages the reader of his note - that even might be a person standing on the bridge because he is tired of life – to look for the capital of Madagascar. This is an invitation to 'stay here' on the one hand and to change perspectives on the other; to widen one's horizon by directing his/her thoughts to the geographically far away island of Madagascar. It can be understood as an articulation as well as a reminder of one situatedness as well as the related notion of self-cultivation which according to Qiu Zhijie means to connect to reality, to examine its structures in order to understand its temporal and contingent shape and become attuned the possibilities of change. It becomes clear that it is not the artist's aim to provide 'comfort' through art but rather to practice art to activate emancipation processes in order to become a 'genuine human being'.⁴³

The awareness that he himself is a constitutive part of the transformational processes of reality is crucial to Qiu Zhijie's self-conception as an artist and it is in this context that he has formulated his contemporary concept of self-cultivation as a critical practice.

Because [art] is a cultural production, artists themselves are also a kind of cultural product. And since the creative process itself is a process of transforming reality, it is also a process of transforming the self. Art production must transform the artist. Art must become a process of moral self-cultivation.⁴⁴

According to Qiu Zhijie, the attitude of 'total art' can already be found in the historical practice of self-cultivation in China:

This attitude of total art actually has always existed in China, and in fact has always been very strong. Through the ages, one path toward self-cultivation has been through art. And internal cultivation has always been unified with external obligation. We believe that there is already an education that aspires towards [this kind of] 'reason'.⁴⁵

Even though the traditional practice of self-cultivation and Qiu Zhijie's contemporary understanding of it in the context of 'total art' are based on the same structural assumptions of the self and the world as being entangled in continuous processes of interrelatedness and transformation, the two views differ in purpose. Historically, self-cultivation meant to enact interrelations as in the case of calligraphic masterpieces, as explained above. Qiu Zhijie seems to specifically critique the Confucian tradition of self-cultivation – following in the way of the sage in accordance with conventions of the Confucian canon in order to become a

⁴³ 邱志杰, *总体艺术论* (On Total Art), 上海: 上海锦绣文章出版社, 2012, 1.

⁴⁴ 'Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 12 March 2014), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

⁴⁵ 'Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 12 March 2014), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

morally good – that could be regarded as an affirmative practice of conforming and adapting to specific historical and social conditions in order to ensure social stability.⁴⁶

Informed by post-modern theories as well as by the Daoist concept of self-cultivation that are both centred on concepts of processual and interrelational reality, the purpose of self-cultivation practice for Qiu Zhijie is not continuity, but freedom:

If your freedom of choice is full of creativity, you are bound to deepen and open up the world and yourself. At this moment, the “I” of this possible world is the new me; it is the real me, the adult me.⁴⁷

Self-cultivation in this regard means the critical examination of the interrelatedness through which oneself and reality are constituted.⁴⁸

The mission of the “human being” is to allow the inherent hidden possibility of the world to become real and, by realizing the possibility of the world, to realize the self. The self-fulfillment and self-development of human being is, at the same time, the perfection and development of the world.⁴⁹

In Qiu Zhijie's view, it is thus the task of art to disclose the frameworks through which we experience the world and make sense of it as man-made, and it is through self-cultivation practices that we not only recognise these structures but also use our imagination for alternative patterns of making sense of the world. It is in this context that Qiu Zhijie repeatedly questions how we have to achieve a state of ‘not knowing’⁵⁰ a term which has been translated into ‘ignoramus’⁵¹ but one I suggest could best be understood as a practice of ‘unlearning.’⁵²

⁴⁶ This understanding of self-cultivation is strongly informed by Neo-Confucianism. Self-cultivation in Buddhism and Daoism was less oriented toward society but to spiritual transcendence.

⁴⁷ Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 12 March 2014), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

⁴⁸ Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 12 March 2014), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

⁴⁹ Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 12 March 2014), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

⁵⁰ 无知者

⁵¹ Guo Xiaoyan, ‘Six Things about Qiu Zhijie’, Jérôme Sans; Guo Xiaoyan (Ed.), *Qiu Zhijie. Breaking the Ice*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2009, 20.

⁵² I am referring to Gayatri Spivak's post-colonial understanding of ‘unlearning’ as a practice that makes us aware of how specific experiences shape our knowledge. Spivak, Gayatri, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Nelson, C. and Grossberg, L. ed., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Basingstoke, Macmillan Education.

It is in this regard that Qiu Zhijie writes about our perception of the world and things accordingly:

The things we see are merely a temporary manifestation that is granted us, but in fact our understanding of this manifestation is far from comprehensive. It is only in retrospect and unthinkingly that the user of things places undue emphasis on the aspect that is already visible, gradually allowing people to forget that there are vast other aspects to the thingness of things, gradually substituting the *xin* [mind-heart] for the thing itself.⁵³

Looking beyond the visible means to acknowledge the transient nature of reality which in turn entails a realisation that there are endless possibilities and perspectives of, and in, life. Qiu Zhijie's interpretation of Wang Xizhi's *Lanting Xu* can also be interpreted in this context. In this view, the erasing of the characters through excessive repetitions does not negate Wang Xizhi's artwork and the Daoist world-view of transience embodied in the artwork. Quite the opposite, the practice of continuous writing can be understood as a radical questioning of static manifestations in order to become aware of reality's transient nature.⁵⁴

By practicing art as self-cultivation, the artist becomes an activist. This entails a practicing of 'art as a verb'⁵⁵ in so far as he or she not only analyses his or her situatedness⁵⁶, but also produces new interrelationships in order to generate alternative realities.

[The] mission is to become, by way of cultural studies, a knower, and at the same time to become, by way of trial and error in experience, an ignoramus. Its [art's] mission is to discover a possible world that is even vaster than the real world. The emergence of a possible world, the realization of a possible society: these are in fact society's evolutionary processes.⁵⁷

⁵³ Qiu Zhijie seems to combine traditional Chinese concepts of an interrelational concept of the self with a de-centered concept as it is defined in post-structuralist theory. His contemporary interpretation of self-cultivation as a critical practice I argue has been deeply informed by post-structuralism.

⁵⁴ I would like to thank Meiling Cheng for pointing out this aspect to me.

⁵⁵ Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 12 March 2014), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

⁵⁶ 'Our behaviours are compelled by a situation, not from the force of necessity. We know that a situation in the world of possibilities can have a variety of responses. We select the best of them and employ it. This is certainly not some kind of 'imperative' act. On the contrary, we are well aware that no situation is inevitable. Precisely because there is no necessary or decisive relationship between situations and actions taken, our will and choices are therefore significant.' Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 2014/3), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

⁵⁷ ' Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (a accessed 12 March 2014), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

Self-cultivation in the context of 'total art' thus implies the need to examine and reveal the relationships through which reality is generated, as well as engaging in the transformational processes of reality by way of creating new relationships in order to generate alternative realities and self identities accordingly. This creating of new relationships and realities through art practice is based on a performative concept of art which Qiu Zhijie ascribes to the notion of *xianshi* (reality/realization)⁵⁸ that describes realisation as a process of establishing alternative realities by transforming latency into visibility through 'doing art.'⁵⁹

Means of collaboration

It is against this background and furthermore in the context of art as self-cultivation – originating from a concept of reality constituted through entangled things and subjectivities – that Qiu Zhijie emphasises collaborative practices as a means of community building and alternative constructions of reality respectively. The transformation of reality through art cannot be realised through the individual actions of one artist alone.

As part of the project *A Suicidology of the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge*, Qiu Zhijie collaborated with Chen Si (the initiator of the local NGO 'Soul Inn' that is active in suicide prevention and rehabilitation) as well as his students from the Total Art Studio at the China Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou.⁶⁰ Together they interviewed people who had tried to commit suicide on the bridge and invited them to participate in art therapy. For this purpose, Qiu Zhijie produced calligraphy exercise books with admonitions by the renowned educationist of Republican China Tao Xingzhi (1891-1946) and installed them at the historical suicide site located at a steep cliff at the Yangtze river close to Nanjing. By copying the words 'Have a second thought' and 'Don't die' Qiu Zhijie hoped to activate calligraphy's healing quality as a self-cultivation practice to (re-)connect art and life.

⁵⁸ 现实

⁵⁹ Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 12 March 2014), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

⁶⁰At the China Art Academy Qiu Zhijie is the director of the *Total Art Studio*(总体艺术工作室) which he founded in 2003. Qiu Zhijie:'Total Art education means not simply to train artists, but to cultivate human beings': Qiu Zhijie's art - Excerpts from a conversation between Lu Jie, Gao Shiming and Qiu Zhijie, Jérôme Sans; Guo Xiaoyan, eds., *Qiu Zhijie. Breaking the Ice*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2009, 22-32.

The curriculum of the Total Art Studio is based on his conception of self-cultivation as a critical cultural practice. He encourages his students to work in different media, to adopt interdisciplinary approaches and to intervene in daily life in order to examine and transform their frameworks of experiencing contemporary realities.

Another example of collaborative action is Qiu Zhijie's bamboo works. For the installations *Endless Circle (Bu xi)* (Ill. 2) and *Cell (Xibao)*, the artist collaborated with local craftsmen, learning how to bamboo weave from them and to integrate the technique in contemporary art practice, thereby connecting people from separate life spheres with one another. Furthermore through passing this knowledge on, he contributes to the continuity of an old cultural technique while at the same time suggesting new potentials for the technique and the use of bamboo as material. The adopting of the technique to create new forms such as a cow head or shoes for the work *Cell* is an articulation of a critical bamboo technique practice. By performing the versatility of the material through exhibiting incomplete reproductions of different bamboo objects; interweaving them with each other such as in *Endless Circle* or by creating bamboo objects in the state of emergence for *Cell*, Qiu Zhijie achieves the impression of a temporalised interconnectivity. His understanding of social reality appears as an endless transformational event, similar to organic processes, that he implies in the titles of both works.

Craftsmanship as a mode of self-cultivation

Next to calligraphy and socially engaged art, Qiu Zhijie has also been advocating craftsmanship as a form of self-cultivation. In his pamphlet on 'total art' he demands that artists should become 'labourers' again and learn how to master handicrafts. In his opinion,

the more familiar you are with the object and tools of the work, the more profoundly you understand the intertwined secrets of the world and life. Craftsmanship is cultivation. The spiritual realm of humankind rises along with the mastery of handicrafts. A deft hand molds its own wisdom.⁶¹

Handicraft as self-cultivation has furthermore also been advocated by Qiu Zhijie as an effective way to overcome the limitations of language based conceptual art, since it not only engages the intellect but also the body when relating and mediating one self's relation to the world.⁶²

Qiu Zhijie as a critical historiographer

The discussions of the artworks above have shown that critical engagement with history has been a central issue in Qiu Zhijie's artistic practice. In his artworks, as

⁶¹ Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 12 March 2014), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

⁶² Qiu has stated often and especially in the context of the so called 'Post-Sense-Sensibility' art end of the 1990s, that he opposes language based conceptual art that does not involve and engage the audience physically and emotionally.

艺术能够帮我做的是让我不表达。(金锋访问邱志杰),

<http://www.qiuzhijie.com/critiquefangtan/003.htm> (accessed 12 March 2014),

well as in his writings and curatorial practice, he understands himself to be a critical historiographer.⁶³

We must ceaselessly dig out those traces that had been erased so that we can get closer and closer toward the truth that writing of history had moved away from intentionally and unintentionally. We need someone like Foucault who would pop up once in a while to remind us: to believe in books completely, one might as well live without them. But we don't render compilation of history meaningless either. On the contrary, compilation is both a human instinct and need.⁶⁴

In his understanding, history is constructed according to specific socio-political and epistemological structures, and it is against this background as well as taking into account the impact of one's subjective gaze that his practice must be understood. Qiu Zhijie is not interested in disclosing 'truth' from given facts, in the sense of a purely positivist historiography, but in deconstructing narratives to examine structures and question relations that constitute historical facts and realities.

Being aware of how his contemporary (artistic) self is generated in relation to history and specific socio-political conditions, he practices art as self-cultivation in order to scrutinise, reflect and also transform his own situatedness. Referring to Michel Foucault and his genealogical method, we might consider Qiu Zhijie a 'genealogist' instead of a hermeneutician. He is not interested in searching for truth in facts but is concerned with their interpretation, since assumptions of 'truth' are always related to specific frameworks of meaning production.⁶⁵ Qiu Zhijie thus questions a teleological concept of history that is related to certain power structures in order to realise and make his audience aware of their own possibilities outside this 'tunnel'⁶⁶.

History becomes a tunnel, and there is only one exit. Those who fail to follow miss the exit and they are destroyed. The leader tells us: "The course of history is set, those who submit to that agenda will prosper, and those who resist are doomed to perish." It is this conception of history that we carry with us as we confront and imagine the future. As we sprint towards a target

⁶³ Qiu Zhijie draws upon Michel Foucault's genealogical approach and on Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of a critical historiography. Qiu Zhijie, 'Do we really have a Future', Qiu Zhijie, Zuo Jing, Zhu Tong, *The Second Triennial of Chinese Art: Archaeology of the Future 2005*, Nanjing: Hubei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2005, 12. See also: Guo Xiaoyan, 'Six Things about Qiu Zhijie', Jérôme Sans; Guo Xiaoyan, eds., *Qiu Zhijie. Breaking the Ice*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2009, 17.

⁶⁴ Qiu Zhijie, 'Do we really have a Future', Qiu Zhijie, Zuo Jing, Zhu Tong, *The Second Triennial of Chinese Art: Archaeology of the Future 2005*, Nanjing: Hubei Fine Arts Publishing House (Wuhan - China), 2005, 13.

⁶⁵ Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, 'The Will to Knowledge', trans. R. Hurley, London: Penguin, 1998, 79.

⁶⁶ Qiu Zhijie in: 'Fleeting Clouds - A Dialogue between Jérôme Sans and Qiu Zhijie', Jérôme Sans; Guo Xiaoyan (Ed.), *Qiu Zhijie. Breaking the Ice*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2009, 10.

at distance, we forget we are surrounded by possibilities. Our minds are filled with imaginings about the future, and our tunnel vision keeps us preoccupied with the task of reaching that exist straight ahead. But it is possible that this tunnel is actually a 'pan flute' and its walls are lined with openings that we do not see clearly.'⁶⁷

It is in this regard, in order to question this tunnel vision, Qiu Zhijie has repeatedly compared his approach to history to archaeological practice in which imagination plays an important role:⁶⁸

The archaeological consciousness doesn't allow us to easily trust the chronological historical narrative. A will always knock and listen on the rock walls of this tunnel. Sometimes they would unexpectedly poke some holes, and create some new options. When walking out of these holes, sometimes there is maybe all brightness and sometimes all darkness. But what they know is that only when the future is not an inevitable pathway, can the future be the way itself.⁶⁹

Qiu Zhijie discusses the issue of 'Historical Materials'⁷⁰ in his pamphlet on 'total art', arguing that the meaning of historical materials is related to specific narratives, and are therefore not fixed, but an invitation for us to interpret and imagine new and alternative meanings.

In the context of Qiu Zhijie's concept of art as self-cultivation – as a critical practice of analysing and transforming one's situatedness – the examination of history has to be understood in connection to his personal contemporaneity. It is through the lens of history and vice versa that he scrutinises his contemporary situatedness.

Maps – mediums of situating practice

Since 2012, Qiu Zhijie has been drawing maps⁷¹ as articulations and mediations of his personal situatedness between locality and globality. As he has stated, they serve as orientational instruments to re-order and understand the world, and to

⁶⁷ Qiu Zhijie in: ,Fleeting Clouds - A Dialogue between Jerome Sans and Qiu Zhijie', Jérôme Sans; Guo Xiaoyan (Ed.), *Qiu Zhijie. Breaking the Ice*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2009, 10.

⁶⁸ Qiu Zhijie, 'Do we really have a Future', Qiu Zhijie, Zuo Jing, Zhu Tong, *The Second Triennial of Chinese Art: Archaeology of the Future 2005*, Nanjing: Hubei Fine Arts Publishing House (Wuhan - China), 2005, 14.

⁶⁹ Qiu Zhijie, 'Do we really have a Future', Qiu Zhijie, Zuo Jing, Zhu Tong, *The Second Triennial of Chinese Art: Archaeology of the Future 2005*, Nanjing: Hubei Fine Arts Publishing House (Wuhan - China), 2005, 25.

⁷⁰ 历史材料

⁷¹ For example: *Map of 21 st Century* , *Map of Utopia* , *Map of Total Art* , *Map of Chinese History* , and *Map of Reactivation*. All of them were first shown during his solo exhibition at the Witte de With Museum in Rotterdam in 2012. Since then Qiu Zhijie has drawn many more maps: www.qiuzhijie.com

locate himself as an artist and human being. For example, the *Map of Total Art* (Ill. 3) is a visualization of how he self-conceptualises himself in a subjective topology of different histories, philosophies, concepts and strategies of art. Presented from a bird's eye view is an urban landscape structured around the 'lake of the real freedom' – freedom, as I have introduced above, is the aim of self-cultivation in Qiu Zhijie's 'total art.' Across the lake, he has drawn the 'zigzag bridge of the spirit of play', which can be viewed as a visualisation of self-cultivation as a critical practice of changing perspectives. Emerging from the centre are the 'avenues of reality', 'avenue of enlightenment', 'avenue of history' and the 'avenue of return to home'. A system of streets and bridges, named for example the 'Beuys bridge', the 'bridge of Zhuangzi watching fish' or the 'bridge of John Cage' connect buildings such as the 'theatre Bayreuth of Wagner', the 'Orchid Pavilion', the 'stadium of self-cultivation' and a building with attached park called 'Neo-Confucianism.' Further elements include parks, such as the 'Santiniketan university of R. Tagore', lakes and rivers such as the 'river of Fluxus' or the 'sedimentary pool', and monuments, like the 'Zhuangzhi monument' or a cemetery standing for the 'study of mortuary system'. Marcel Duchamp, represented by his iconic readymade 'Fountain', is placed on an island, and thereby given a prominent and at the same time isolated position in the context of *The Map of Total Art*. Other examples of elements that in interrelation constitute the concept of 'total art' are representations of 'personal experience' in the form of a chest of drawers, 'the square of rethinking media' or the 'dock of participation', from which an 'icebreaker of social intervention' departs, as well as the 'Suicidology of Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge'. By combining Chinese, European, American, Japanese and Indian concepts that according to Qiu Zhijie also thematise art as life practice⁷², he challenges and deconstructs conventional narratives on the relationship between art and life, in order to activate the search for new perspectives and associations, and to realise the potential for alternative realities. It is against this background that self-cultivation as a critical practice to examine and transform one self's situatedness also becomes an effective tool in critical transcultural research, since it deconstructs cultural essentialist narratives of Euro-America and China, as well as the related dichotomy of East versus West, in favour of a focus on zones of contact and interrelatedness. For Qiu Zhijie, mapping is in the first place a proactive practice of meaning-production that everybody has

⁷² 'In Leonardo da Vinci, we see the linkage of knowledge and technique; how perceptive observation and rational study nourish one another, becoming cyclic. In Wagner, we see the how immersion-style domination of the senses and ideological symbolism unite to become one kind of design of spiritual life. In John Ruskin and William Morris, we find how critical socialist ideals emerge from the linking of utility and the everyday. In the Bauhaus, we go yet a step further to find the intimate integration of the ideal of an overall transformation of life and hand craftsmanship. From the rethinking of modernity that extended globally in the twentieth century, from Rudolph Steiner to Rabindranath Tagore, from the Black Mountain College to Joseph Beuys, we can see the strength of the efforts to construct art as life.' Qiu Zhijie, *On Total Art*, undated, no page numbers, <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/e-critiquelunwen/016.htm> (accessed 12 March 2014), translated by Jennifer Dorothy Lee with Rebecca E. Karl.

the possibility to undertake,⁷³ inasmuch as he is also aware of the representational power inherent in the practice of mapping.

In order to not fall in this trap, Qiu Zhijie stresses the subjective quality of the orders of knowledge he suggests. Moreover, in order to underscore his concern for emancipation from specific power structures through art, in his more recent mapping activities, he has increasingly worked with strategies that have a performative effect on the viewer. For example, for the artwork *Playground 1* (2013) he painted a map of different geographical territories such as Tibet, Gibraltar or South Belize on the floor. Instead of following and adopting the connections and categories by which the artist orders these regions, the audience is invited to create their own random connections by rolling mobile globes made out of different materials such as wood, glass, stone displayed on the map. Each globe stands for a specific category; a certain emotion, identity, political action or a natural disaster. In this map, as Qiu Zhijie has described it, 'you can imagine the globe marked with "earthquake" may roll to the map of "utopia" or this ball for "revolution" will end up with "bedroom," or "party" ends up with "revolution".'⁷⁴

Contemporaneity as a critical category

By emphasising contingency and subjectivity in the production of meaning, as well as by grouping different cultural and historical concepts together, Qiu Zhijie questions cultural essentialist categorisations and deconstructs dominant narratives of Chinese contemporaneity. In general, Chinese contemporary art historiography is still dominantly constructed on an understanding of 'contemporaneity' as a chronological category related to the temporal structure of modern – contemporary. In China, discourses of modernity and modernisation are historically related to the invasion of Western imperialists during the Republican era. In order to 'catch up' with the West and its ideology of progress, diverse directions were formulated by intellectuals and politicians that have an impact on contemporary Chinese art discourses to this day. While one group of people advocated a break with Chinese traditions in favour of Westernisation in order to be able to re-habilitate China's strength and power, the other group searched for renewal within the country's own cultural history.⁷⁵

⁷³ 'I find it is difficult to make sense of this world. Creating maps is my way of resisting the madness of the world. We live in a world that makes us lost. Everyone has a map, or maps, that they carry within themselves and we should continuously create and recreate those maps. It is a proactive way of creating meaning, instead of passively accepting the meaning created by other people. The best result from my installation is for everyone to go and draw their own maps, perhaps of their interpersonal relationships, or just for the books and movies that they've read and seen. Draw a map and create a meaningful world for yourself.' See: <http://hk.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/903290/qiu-zhijie-making-maps-against-the-madness-of-the-world> (accessed 12 March 2014)

⁷⁴<http://hk.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/903290/qiu-zhijie-making-maps-against-the-madness-of-the-world> (accessed 12 March 2014)

⁷⁵ Clarke, David, 'Revolutions in Vision: Chinese art and the experience of modernity', Kam Louie, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Since the end of the 1970s,⁷⁶ discussions on how to define modern and contemporary Chinese art in relation to 'the West' in Chinese contemporary art historiography are still relevant, and have to be seen in relation to discourses of modernity at the beginning of the 21st century. Even though 'Chinese modernity' is defined according to its specific locality⁷⁷, it is still mainly understood as a supplement to Western modernity, since its narrative is deeply based upon the history of influence of Western modernism in China and the binary structure inherent in this view of modernism.⁷⁸

Against these genealogies of modernity and contemporaneity, Qiu Zhijie seems to adopt the notion of 'contemporaneity' as a critical category in order to analyse, articulate and mediate these genealogies in relation to his experiences of contemporary reality. Qiu Zhijie situates himself as a transcultural contemporary artist⁷⁹ who is aware of how contemporaneity is not universal, but a 'disjunctive unity of present times',⁸⁰ which according to Peter Osborne, has to be understood as a 'shared fiction' that everybody in the game of contemporary art has to imagine in order to be able to partake in. Qiu Zhijie critically reflects on how his personal contemporary situatedness as an artist living in China and at the same time as a participant in global contemporary art discourses, is constructed upon specific historical and geopolitical conditions. In his articulations of how art must transform reality, he draws upon multiple historical and cultural narratives. At the same time,

⁷⁶ The beginning of the narrative of contemporary Chinese art is conventionally set in 1979 when in the process of the open door policy after the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong contemporary artists profited from the comparatively liberal political climate that encouraged free artistic expression and found new inspiration through the reception of various publications on Western culture that for the first time were available in China during that time. Among others it was especially Gao Minglu who has constructed this narrative. See for example Gao Minglu, *The Wall. Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art*. New York and Beijing: The Albright Knox Art Gallery and China Millennium Museum of Art, 2005.

⁷⁷ Gao Minglu, 'Particular Time, Specific Place, and the Truth of Mine. Modernity and Avantgarde in China', *Documenta Magazine No 1-3, 2007 Reader*, Cologne: TASCHEN, 2007, 178-191.

⁷⁸ Western modernity was constituted by breaking with its own past and by adopting non-Western traditions instead. This practice was based on structures of 'othering', which in turn solidified power structures of the West as the centre and 'the others' as the periphery. It is in this context that Shigemi Inaga speaks of the 'impossible Avant-garde' in Japan. He argues that if non-Western artists refer to their own traditions, they are according to the modernist logic, in no way called modernists, but are always stuck in the trap of being called traditionalists. It is only via detour of Western modernism, the centre, that they can also become modern. Inaga, Shigemi, 'The Impossible Avant-Garde in Japan', trans. Margaret J. Flynn, *Comparative and General Literature* 4, 1993, 69.

⁷⁹ Peter Osborne would call Qiu Zhijie a transnational contemporary artist, since in his opinion 'transnational' is the most suitable term to describe our 'current temporal unity of historical experience' which according to him is constituted by global capital. See Osborne, 2013, 26.

⁸⁰ 'Differential historical temporality of the present: a coming together of different but equally present times, a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times.' Osborne, 2013, 17.

he is aware that how he conceptualises this issue as a contemporary Chinese artist is constructed by 'geopolitical differentiated construction of the present, [and] its own prehistory'⁸¹.

By emphasising interrelationality and critical situatedness, Qiu Zhijie is neither trapped in discourses of 'Chineseness' nor in dualistic structures of essentially differentiating the East from the West. Instead, he situates the histories of Chinese contemporary art as well as global contemporary art transculturally by introducing his critical examinations of contemporary realities and his imaginations of how to transform them.

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⁸¹ Osborne, 2013, 25