

GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World

May 11, 2018 – September 23, 2018

Themes | Qiu Zhijie, Map of “Art and China after 1989

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- introduction



Qiu Zhijie, Map of “Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World,” 2017.

Ink on paper, mounted to silk, five panels, 240 x 720 cm overall.

Solomon R.Guggenheim Museum, New York,

Gift of the artist with additional funds contributed by the International Director’s Council T31.2017

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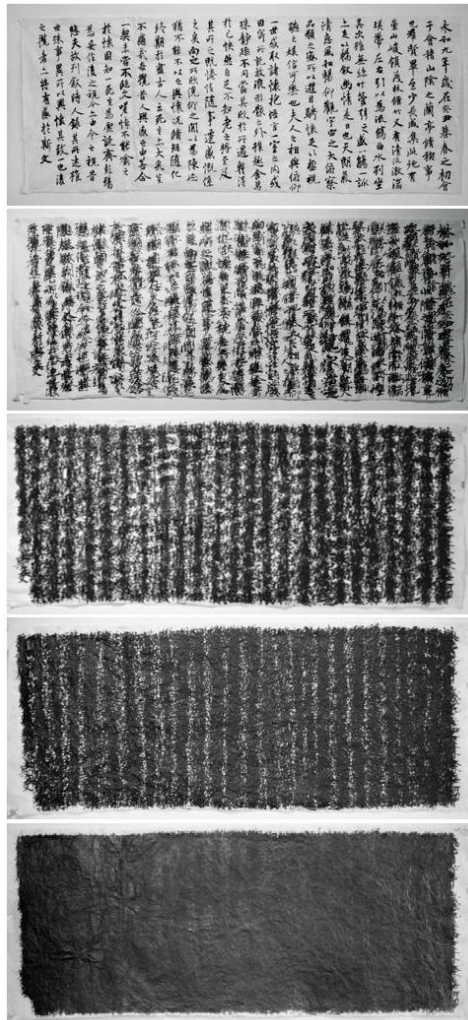


Photo: Courtesy the artist; right Qiu Zhijie, Assignment No. 1: Copying the “Orchid Pavilion Preface” 1,000 Times, 1990/95.

Color video, silent, 35 min.Courtesy the artist; Ink on paper, 70 x 160 cm.

Collection of Chang Tsong-zung © Qiu Zhijie

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Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World is a large exhibition of contemporary art from China that spans the years 1989 to 2008, which can be seen as the most transformative period of modern Chinese and recent world history. The period extends from the end of the Cold War and the spread of **globalization** to the rise of China as a global presence, culminating in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The exhibition highlights approximately 70 key Chinese artists and artist collectives and features nearly 150 experimental works in film and video, **installation**, painting, sculpture, photography, performance, and socially engaged art and activist art. The show is organized in six chronological and thematic sections occupying the second floor at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.

“All of us have a map in our heads of everything. For example, Hong Kong: if all of us were to commit to paper our personal maps of Hong Kong, [they] would all look as different as snowflakes.” [1]

Qiu created *Map of “Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World,”* a five-panel ink-on-paper map that charts the history of art and political movements covered in the exhibition.³ Qiu is well suited for this task; he has made many conceptual maps that diagram ideas and concepts rather than physical places. Mapmaking is one of the fundamental ways humans are able to imagine the world. Through maps, the unknown is made visible and understandable. Qiu uses the histories and techniques of mapmaking together with an ancient Chinese tradition of mapping imaginary places to create a conceptual territory that represents the subject matter and time period of the exhibition.

Having practiced **Chinese calligraphy** since childhood—a form of writing created with a soft brush dipped in liquid black ink and brushed on paper or silk, akin to painting—Qiu Zhijie (b. 1969, Fujian Province, China) has used this traditional art form as an important resource and subject in his practice, from his earliest work to this day.²

In the work *Assignment No. 1: Copying the “Orchid Pavilion Preface” 1,000 Times* (1990/95), Qiu records the process of copying one of the most famous works in the history of Chinese calligraphy. Composed in the fourth century, Wang Xizhi’s (303–361 AD) *Orchid Pavilion Preface* is a touchstone of Chinese calligraphy that students have tried to master through repetition over the last 1,500 years. Qiu copied this famous work one thousand times, but instead of doing so on separate pages, he layered his writing on the same sheet of paper so the words eventually dissolve into a solid field of black ink. To emphasize the progression of the work, Qiu recorded the process on video. By focusing on the process of writing rather than on its content, Qiu upends the focus of calligraphy practice from that of communication to the artist’s creative process.

- Questions

Show: Qiu Zhijie, *Map of “Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World,”* 2017

Ask students to look closely at this work. Its subject is the very exhibition it appears in, *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*. What names and events do you recognize? Which ones are unfamiliar?

Compare Qiu’s work to other maps you are familiar with. How is this work similar to or different from maps you have used?

Show: Qiu Zhijie, *Assignment No. 1: Copying the “Orchid Pavilion Preface” 1,000 Times*, 1990/95

Ask students for their initial responses to this work, and record their comments.

Show students photo documentation that reveals how a similar work was created (<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/80/73/59/807359c4fc9cc93c2c096071eed4fca5.jpg>). Ask students if understanding how the work was created changes their response to it, and how.

Practiced for over six thousand years, Chinese calligraphy is the most revered art form in China. Qiu studied this ancient art for many years, but approaches the subject from a different perspective. Instead of using calligraphy as a means of conveying truth and meaning, he approaches calligraphy as a time-based process, like a performance of putting marks on paper. Qiu confronts a recurring theme in contemporary Chinese art—how does one successfully incorporate traditional Chinese culture into contemporary thought and practice? Discuss with students which aspects of his work seem traditional and which veer toward more contemporary thinking.

- Activities

Qiu takes concepts that are usually expressed in words and converts them into images, which depict hierarchies, impasses, and ironies. This type of illustration of ideas and concepts is sometimes called a “mind map,” a visual tool that helps to structure information, gain fresh insights, and avoid linear thinking.

Ask students to select a topic they are interested in, such as a certain book, place, or idea. How might they convey the things they know about this topic graphically to help others understand it? Using pencils and colored pencils, students should put these graphic visualizations to paper. When finished, ask students to share their mind maps, and to try to gauge how successfully they were able to communicate their ideas to others.

In the opening quote of this section, Qiu states, “All of us have a map in our heads of everything. For example, Hong Kong: if all of us were to commit to paper our personal maps of Hong Kong, [they] would all look as different as snowflakes.” Suggest a single topic to your students—it can be something the class is currently studying, an upcoming event or holiday, or a topic you want them to consider, like healthy eating or conserving energy. Using paper, pencils, and colored pencils, students should map their ideas. When finished, ask students to share their mind maps. How do the results relate to Qiu’s statement? Ask students to discuss the similarities and differences among their mind maps.

In addition to making work on his own, Qiu has also created work in collaboration with other artists, and offers workshops that invite participants to interact with works that have moveable parts. These collaborative maps are intended to invent new ways of understanding the

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world. [4] Working in small groups, challenge students to select a theme and create a map that depicts the theme graphically. This will require quite a bit of discussion, planning, and revisions in preparation for transferring their preliminary drawing to a final draft.

In China children are taught from a young age to appreciate and respect calligraphy. Schools provide at least one calligraphy lesson each week, and each student has his or her own box of calligraphy materials. [5] The supplies needed to allow students to experiment with Chinese brush painting are widely available, and many instructive books and videos can provide students with a hands-on introduction to this enduring art form.

VOCABULARY

Adapted from Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition, unless otherwise noted.

Chinese calligraphy: A traditional form of writing with brush and ink on paper or silk that is prized along with ink painting as the greatest art form in China, Japan, and Korea.[6]

Globalization: Globalization is a process of interaction and integration among people, companies, and governments of different nations, characterized by an international industrial and financial business structure. It is marked especially by the free flow of capital, labor, goods, and ideas. The term dates to 1989, near to the time when the Cold War ended and the Internet was invented, giving rise to a "borderless" world. The benefits of globalization include the global exchange of ideas and people, while the consequences include the rise of multinational corporations at the expense of poor countries. [7]

Installation art: A form of large-scale, three-dimensional art that is designed for a specific exhibition space. Installation art is often made of a range of found or fabricated materials that are assembled to create a specific environment.[8]

RESOURCES

Munroe, Alexandra, ed. *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*. Exh. cat. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2017.

Art Wall: Qiu Zhijie: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQBRDaW9SmA>

Biennale Arte 2015: Qiu Zhijie: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mftkXaH6Wps>

Interview with Qiu Zhijie: The Ullens Collection – Experimentation and Evolution: <http://www.sothebys.com/en/news-video/videos/2011/09/Interview-Qiu-Zhijie-Ullens-Collection-Experimentation-Evolution.html>

NOTES

[1] Qiu Zhijie, quoted in "Mapping the World: Hong Kong's Spring Workshop Hosts Qiu Zhijie," *Art Radar*, <http://artradarjournal.com/2013/08/09/mapping-the-world-hong-kongs-spring-workshop-hosts-qiu-zhijie/>.

[2] See *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, ed. Alexandra Munroe, exh. cat. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2017), p. 108.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[4] "Mapping the World," *Art Radar*.

[5] See Yat-Ming Cathy Ho, *The Chinese Calligraphy Bible: The Essential Illustrated Guide to Over 300 Beautiful Characters* (Hauppauge, NY: Baron's Educational Series, 2007), p. 10.

[6] Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Metropolitan Museum of Art, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chcl/hd_chcl.htm

[7] <http://www.globalization101.org/what-is-globalization/>

[8] Adapted from Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition.