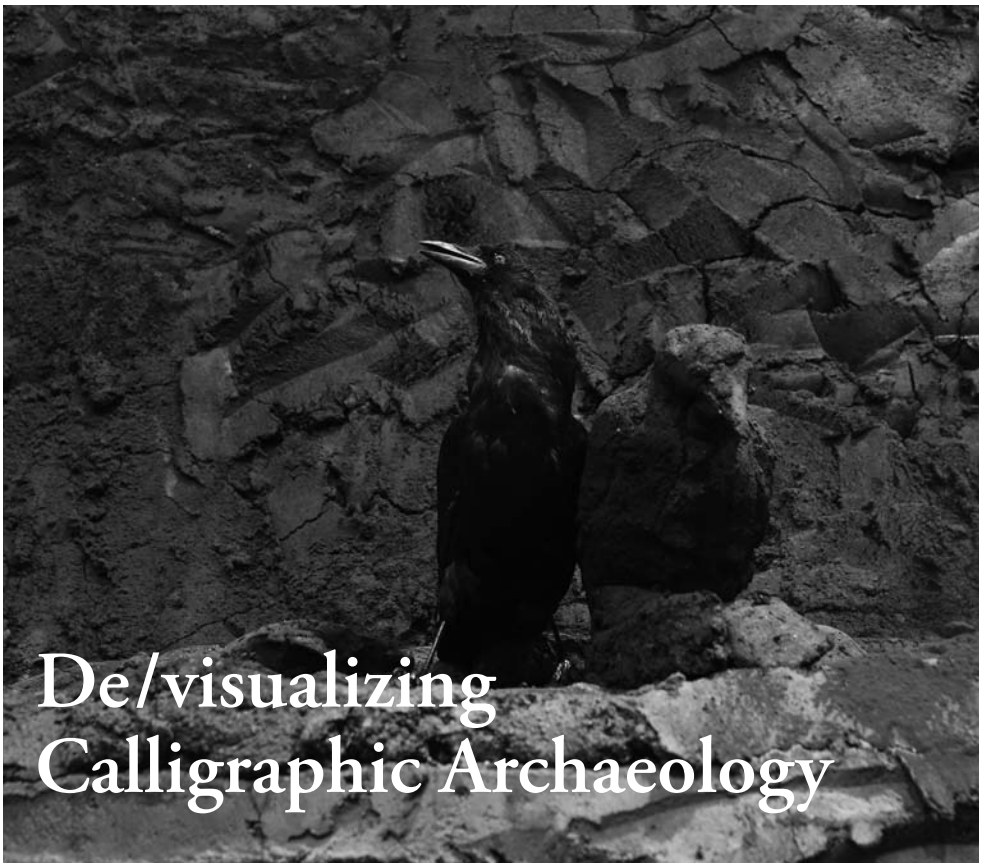

De/visualizing Calligraphic Archaeology

Qiu Zhijie's Total Art

Meiling Cheng

Act I, Scene 1

Recycling Visuality

Two workers circulate inside an archaeological dig that occupies the entire first-floor loft space (23 × 8.5 × 5 meters) of Exhibition Hall B in the Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. The archaeological site is composed of several plateaus, connected by stairs. Viewers are encouraged to enter the cave, explore its soft black coal-covered surfaces and various reclusive corners, and pass through it to enter other exhibition halls on the second floor. Littered all over the coal-paved grounds are life-sized sculpted bodies of crows, made out of the same substance as the sculpted cave. Most viewers cannot help but trample on these sightless fallen crows as they seek footholds. Mediation, however, is in place. When any mass of crows gets flattened, the workers shovel up their shapeless remains, bring the ashes back to a central worktable, and put the coal remnants into a plastic mold to produce more crows. The workers then scatter these newly

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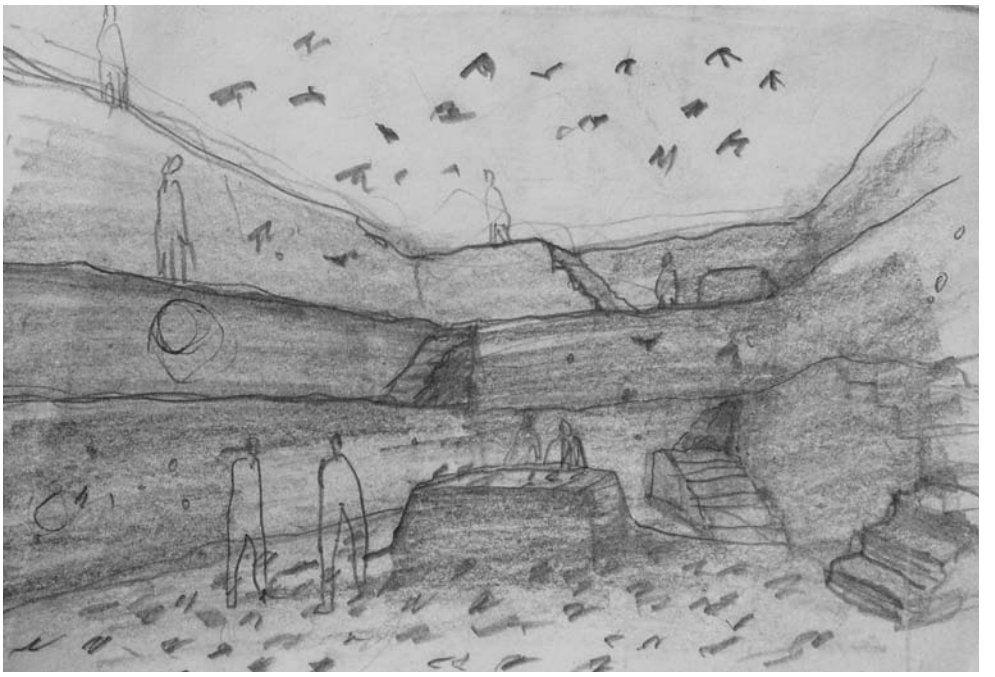

Figure 2. Qiu's drawing for The Red Cliff Poetry. Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi *by Qiu Zhijie, Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. (Photo by Qiu Zhijie)*

made crows along the path, allowing them to be smashed—yet again—by random footprints. This cycle of molding, smashing, and remolding crows is continuous.[1]

Act II

Sampling Total Art

The above live performance appeared in the exhibition entitled *Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi* (8 July–24 August 2008) by the Beijing-based multimedia artist, Qiu Zhijie (see Qiu 2008a). This solo exhibition is the first installment of a massive project, coordinated under the general bilingually publicized title *Qiu Zhijie Nanjing Changjiang daqiao zisha xianxiang ganyu jihua/Qiu Zhijie: A Suicidology of the Nanjing Yangzi River Bridge*, which comprises an ongoing series of cultural fieldwork, historical documentation, sociological investigation, cross-media artworks, and international exhibitions. Qiu's ambitious series responds to the status of the Nanjing Bridge as China's most popular suicide location. According to the artist, the official

1. I saw the exhibition in Shanghai on 12 July 2008, which was a Sunday. The two workers were off on that particular date, but viewers were invited to enter and explore the archaeological cave. My account of the live performance portion was based on the artist's plan and his oral descriptions. Originally, the artist wished to also include a hundred live crows in the cave, but Zendai MoMA rejected the idea. I have translated all my citations from the artist and other Chinese sources here, including the various titles in this total art project. At times, my translations differ from the ones publicized by the artist on his personal website. Following the local convention, Chinese names are listed surname first, unless the person prefers otherwise.

Figure 1. (previous page) Inside the archaeological dig in Crystalloid: a taxidermed crow next to a coal crow. Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi *by Qiu Zhijie, Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. (Photo by Qiu Zhijie)*

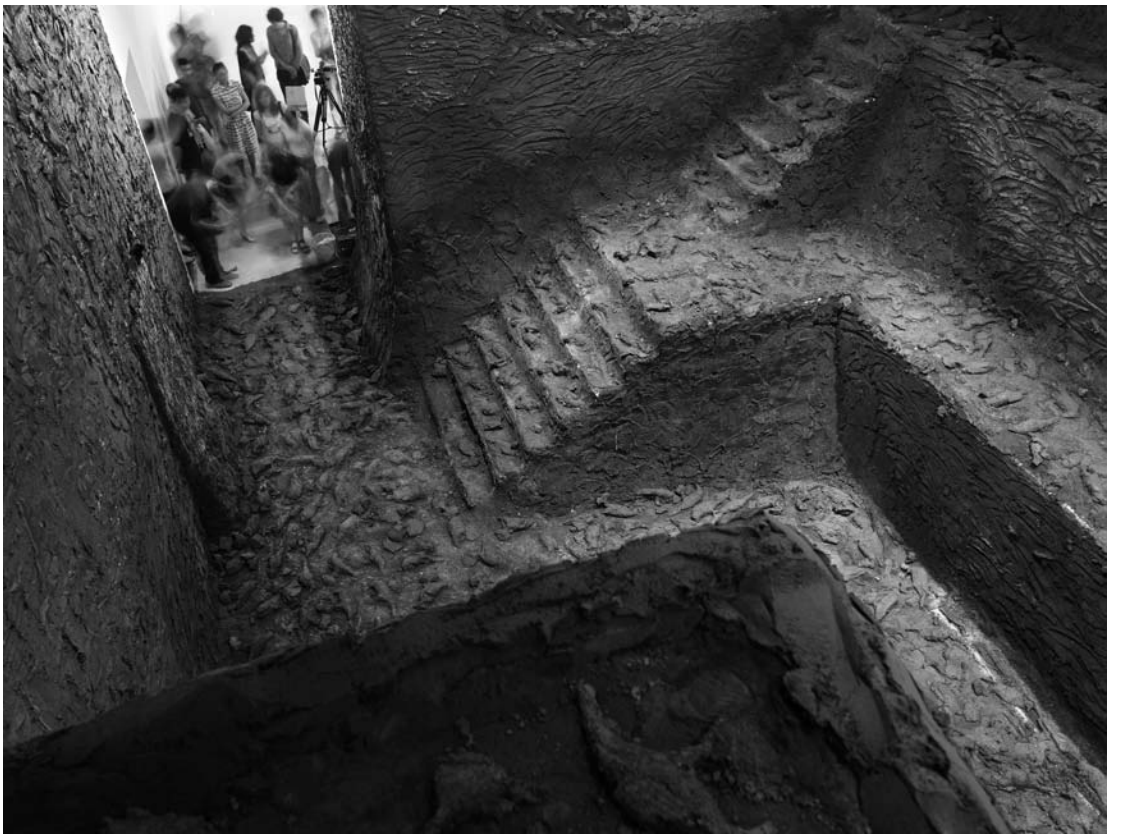

Figure 3. The Exhibition Hall B at Zendai MoMA: A closer view of Qiu's constructed archaeological dig with coal crows. Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi *by Qiu Zhijie. (Photo by Qiu Zhijie)*

record holds that over 2,000 people have committed suicide on the Nanjing Bridge since its completion in 1968—a statistic even more startling than that of the world's putatively top suicide magnet, San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge (around 1,200 people since 1937) (2008g). Intrigued by the momentous social phenomenon surrounding a structure that *The Guinness Book of World Records* listed as "the longest bridge with the dual functions of highway and railway," Qiu launches a similarly extensive long-term art project in order to understand and redress the problem (2008g).

In *The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi* we see the first working model for Qiu's *Suicidology* series. The exhibition combines Qiu's four artistic orientations: the archival; the interventionist; the aesthetic/conceptual; and the ethical/philosophical. Correspondingly, the exhibition space in Zendai MoMA is divided into four display sections, identified as Archive; Clinic; Think Tank; and Crystalloid. Across the four sections, the art mediums represented cover a comprehensive range, including drawing, calligraphy, printmaking, sculpture, installation, photography, video, and performance.

Judging by the ways that different parts of this show resonate thematically like variant movements of a symphony, I take *The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi* more as a single opus than as a retrospective exhibition. I find it most fruitful to approach this show as a sample of Qiu's "total art," a praxis that the artist has been developing since 2003, both for his own career and with his students at the Chinese Art Academy in Zhejiang (see Qiu 2008d). Qiu defines total art as an artistic practice based on cultural research, which turns to specific sociocultural events as

catalysts for art-making, with the intent of proactively affecting viewers' daily lives (2008d). This total art aspires to create efficacious art actions that challenge biased mainstream values in order to offer new perspectives on life. Thus, as Qiu asserts, the live site for his total art is history in the making.

According to Qiu, his concept of total art emerges from his extensive experiences as a curator, practitioner, and critic/theorist of live and new media art in the 1990s and early 2000s (2008d). Indeed, in his capacity as an artist, Qiu assumes many roles: investigator, creator, thinker, activist, teacher, poet, photographer, healer, and collaborator. He compiles archives and collects castaways; he composes philosophical treatises and takes snapshots. Qiu is a cultural archaeologist who not only digs into the historical past and present, but also sculpts toward the future. The archaeological performance that he directed at Zendai MoMA is an imago for his total art.

Qiu's concept of total art recalls similar practices in Europe and America, such as Joseph Beuys's "social sculpture" in Germany, or Suzanne Lacy's "new genre public art" in the United States (see Ray 2001; Rosenthal 2005; Lacy 1995). But there are also important differences that make Qiu's total art distinct. While social sculpture and new genre public art are deeply invested in contemporary sociopolitical issues, Qiu's total art traces present ills to past pathology, consciously finding its raison d'être in remaking Chinese history. Both social sculpture and new genre public art are staged by activists who use art to mobilize communities of engaged citizens in the here and now. Qiu's spectatorial and participatory communities, however, include not only his coevals, but also—even more importantly—his predecessors.

Although Qiu relates his total art to his recent professional practice, I suggest that his concept finds an earlier and even stronger basis in his command of classical Chinese literature, and especially in his training as a calligrapher. We can trace his artistic genealogy to both art forms of the traditional Chinese literati. Their praxis was shaped by the oft-cited dictum that may also serve as Qiu's manifesto: "Yi tianxia wei jiren" (taking the world—or all under heaven—as one's personal responsibility).

Like his forebearer writer-scholars, Qiu sees no division between disciplines. The totality of knowledge is his library, in which he burrows, swims, tumbles, and soars like a veritable Renaissance man. Similar to other calligraphers, Qiu 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. Such training, I believe, cultivates in a calligrapher two epistemic tendencies: (1) to search for a consistent methodology rather than for a particular style; (2) to access worldly phenomena as calligraphic scripts, ready to be inscribed. Qiu's total art manifests both tendencies. As Qiu himself suggests, he sees all schools of Chinese art as "mutations from calligraphy" (Qiu 2008e). Qiu's total art is, in this sense, a contemporary version of an ancient Chinese art.

Act III, Scene 1

The Archive in the Clinic

As a total art project, *The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi* is structured to support Qiu's virtuosic output and cross-disciplinary aspirations. Among its four parts, both Archive and Clinic have clear focuses: the former deals with the political significance of the Nanjing Bridge in China's revolutionary history; the latter with the aftermath that continues to this day. In contrast, the other two parts—Think Tank and Crystalloid—are much more multivalent, dense with allusions and implications. Given that the show's title highlights Zhuang Zi, the Daoist master, perhaps it would not be too clichéd or gratuitous for me to suggest that such a contrast foregrounds the

Figure 4. Archive: The Nanjing Bridge-themed souvenirs. Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi *by Qiu Zhijie, Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. (Photo by Qiu Zhijie)*

dynamic interplay between *yang* (positivity) and *yin* (negativity)—although, I admit, what's opaque/*yin* to me might be quite lucid/*yang* to others.

In Archive, we encounter a stupendous collection of historical documents and objects excavated from the past four decades, ever since the Nanjing Bridge's opening in 1968. These miscellaneous items—all imprinted with information, insignias, icons, or stylized renditions of the Nanjing Bridge—attest to the power and prevalence of the propaganda machine in Mao's China. Historically, the Nanjing Yangzi River Bridge was "the first double-decker, double-track highway and railway bridge designed and constructed by the Chinese without outside engineering assistance" (2008g). At the beginning of the bridge's construction, China had weathered a diplomatic breakup with Russia, which withdrew its experts from the project. Thus, the successful completion of the Nanjing Yangzi River Bridge emerged as an icon of "national resilience," a symbolism reinforced by Chairman Mao's inscription "Duli zizhu; zili gengsheng" (Independent Self-reliance; Autonomous Revival) on the bridge's entrance gate upon its inauguration (2008g). Such mytho-political significance has dented the nation's visual consciousness, meanwhile proliferating itself in countless documents and memorabilia. As Qiu sums up, "The Nanjing Yangzi River Bridge occupies an important emblematic position in China's visual culture. Its image is endowed with a triple symbolism, joining nationalism with revolution and modernity. It's practically a second Tiananmen" (2008c).

Qiu's statement finds incontrovertible material evidence in a 30 December 1968 edition of *Ren Min Ri Bao* (the People's Daily Newspaper), whose front page carries three celebrated messages: The title portion features Chairman Mao's calligraphy for *Ren Min Ri Bao* and a column containing a paragraph from the (then) Chinese communist bible, *Mao Yu Lu* (commonly translated as Quotations from the Chairman Mao Zedong); the top half applauds the opening of the Nanjing Yangzi River Bridge as a miraculous triumph of the "Mao-led proletarian revolution"; and the bottom half gloats over the country's successful testing of the hydrogen

Figure 5. Clinic: The converted beds from "The Soul's Station" with alarm clocks on their legs. Behind the beds are the wind-battered signboards originally used by Li Si at the Nanjing Bridge: "Bitterness and happiness are the root of being human" and "Kindly treat life well on each and every day." Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi *by Qiu Zhijie, Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. (Photo by Qiu Zhijie)*

bomb as a victory for "Mao's thought." Incisively, Qiu selected the image of this newspaper page for his exhibition poster. His Archive also exhibits multiple clones of the 1968 *People's Daily*, together with other fragments, detritus, and souvenirs from the same era. Exhumed from their anonymity as ephemera, they now are lifted to prominence in their neatly ordered frames. Enclosed in transparent covers, these salvaged objects are laid out for viewing, like a community of glass coffins hanging on the wall.

"Fan yiding yao chi; Lei yiding yao liu" (Rice must be eaten; Tears must be shed). This couplet, written in simplified Chinese characters and inscribed in black coal on the white wall, anchors the display in Clinic. This "Big-Character" wall lettering cites from an activist named Li Si, who every weekend since 2003 has volunteered to patrol the Nanjing Bridge in an attempt to prevent incidents of suicide from happening. In collaboration with Li, Qiu turned this area of his installation into a testimonial of Li's charitable project. Photographic and material documents of Li's interventionist work on the Nanjing Yangzi River Bridge cover most of the wall space. This exhibition hall also bears resemblance—if abstractly—to the Xinling yizhan (Soul's Station) halfway house that Li founded to keep and console those he has rescued.

Four single worn-out beds, transferred straight from Soul's Station, occupy the central floor area. Qiu humorously annotates the nature of these convalescence beds by installing alarm clocks on the legs of each bed. A swarm of alarm clocks also lands below the outmoded couch

pushed against the wall, near a monitor that plays a looping video documentary of Qiu's conversations with those who attempted suicide. During my visit, the alarm clocks merely glared at me, jeering mutely. Qiu's original plan was to set these fully functional alarm clocks to ring every five minutes, one at a time. Had the plan been realized, the alarms would have given us a cartoonish impression of our living world: every five minutes, a thought occurs; a car is crashed; a species becomes extinct; a banana gets eaten; a baby is born; a vow is given; a lover is betrayed; a melody is remembered; a tycoon dies. "For how many different reasons does someone commit suicide?" the sound installation might seem to ask. Being a satirical quip, it would have offered an animated antithesis to Li's straightforward but benevolent maxim: "Rice must be eaten; tears must be shed." The artist's plan, however, proved too high-maintenance for the museum staff, which unilaterally decided not to wind up and reset the alarming cacophony.

Qiu's droll conversion of the furniture from Soul's Station for his Clinic at Zendai epitomizes the artist's intervention in Li's altruistic mission. The collaboration between the two men also results in the transposition of many props and accessories that Li formerly used in his work, including two wind-battered wooden boards, a pair of binoculars, a red vest, and an old motorcycle. In an exchange with Li, Qiu replaced these worn items with new ones for Li's use, while reframing the once utilitarian tools as art objects. The wooden boards were originally signposts inscribed in blue and red with another couplet of Li's message: "You ku you le ren zhi ben; Shan dai sheng ming mei yi tian" (Bitterness and happiness are the root of being human; Kindly treat life well on each and every day). Qiu replaced these boards with steel plates on the Nanjing Bridge, giving Li's message a more durable vehicle. Inside the exhibition hall, however, the artist seems to reverse his tactic—à la Duchamp—using the art context to formalize the quotidian. Imitating Li's casual style, Qiu lets the two wooden boards loosely slant toward a wall, but he also ceremoniously places in a glass frame a sample of Li's prosaic calligraphy, using the same couplet Li wrote on the signboards. More evidence of Li's work appears on the wall: framed pictures of the man in action on the bridge, wearing a bright red vest and surveying the span with binoculars, next to the actual red vest and binoculars.

Figure 6. Clinic: The red-framed calligraphic model writing scrolls. Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi *by Qiu Zhijie, Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. (Photo by Meiling Cheng)*

Figure 7. Detail of figure 6 character, with outline drawn in red ink.

Other traces of Qiu's intervention hang on the other side of the wall; several vertical scrolls of calligraphy repeat the same colloquial phrase, accompanied by the name of its author: "Xiang yi xiang si bu de, [by] Tao Xingzhi" (literally "Think and think die no gain," meaning "Better think twice before you commit suicide, for there is no gain in dying"). Curiously, while the calligraphy itself appears in an expertly rendered cursive style, the sentence includes a mistake in its last word, *de* (to gain). The original

component on the left side should have been the *ren* radical (亻), denoting "human," rather than *shuei*, which consists of three slanting lines denoting "water." When I look closer, I notice a red frame surrounding each calligraphic character and realize that Qiu has devised a calligraphic exercise. Qiu first chose a phrase—xiang yi xiang si bu de—written by Tao, a suicide-by-drowning survivor Qiu met in Soul's Station. Tao's close escape from water had inspired him to coin the neologism "de" using the water radical. Intrigued, Qiu inscribed Tao's phrase in his own cursive writing, a calligraphic style Qiu specializes in. The artist then applied a particular printing technique to mass-produce a calligraphic model scroll, showing only a red outline of each character. He distributed these printed exercise scrolls among those who found a second chance at Soul's Station and encouraged them to fill in the blanks with brush and ink, following the calligraphic model outlines he provided. Art as healing, a concept practiced by many performance artists—including Beuys, Lacy, Anna Halprin, Marina Abramovic, and Ron Athey—finds a Chinese application in Qiu's work.

The red calligraphic frames emptied of their ink contents symbolize the quality of Qiu's presence in Clinic, in contrast to that of Li, whose images, belongings, and charitable avocation dominate this exhibition hall. Qiu is present mostly as a behind-the-scenes observer, making his involvement as unobtrusive as possible. A major part of Qiu's mediation in Clinic assumes the neutral perspective of a sociological investigation: Qiu and his student team distributed questionnaires regarding suicide to pedestrians they then interviewed on the Nanjing Bridge. These questionnaires, filled in with hand-written responses, are lined up on a wall, displayed like the documents in Archive. In this light, Qiu's relation to Li resembles that between a photographer and his portrait model. A blown-up photograph mounted on another wall captures this relationship: the photograph features Li flanked by his volunteer team in the doorway to Soul's Station, posing—all smiles—for Qiu's signature spectral group shot.

Figure 8. Archive: The ink-producing machine with the revolving ink sticks in motion. Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi *by Qiu Zhijie, Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. (Photo by Qiu Zhijie)*

Completed questionnaires take up a small section of one wall in Clinic, but occupy an entire wall in Archive. This arrangement reflects Qiu's spatial design for *The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi*. Although the exhibition is laid out along four conceptual vectors, the artist presents the four parts as interdependent components of a whole by mixing up their territories with cross-references. Within Archive, for instance, Qiu places an inventive implement whose features seem to refer to both Clinic and Crystalloid: an oblong iron cast table (4 meters long × 60 centimeters wide × 90 centimeters high) adapted to be an ink-producing machine. At each end of the tabletop stands a pair of small iron columns, attached to self-revolving anchors clamped onto four custom-made ink sticks (2 × 6.5 × 25 cm each). Tiny red flags flap on top of these ink sticks. Next to the four tabletop iron columns are symmetrically placed clinical metal stands, the kind used in intravenous therapy. Each stand carries a medicinal bag of clean water, which drips through a catheter to supply lubricants to the revolving ink stick, producing the liquid ink. The liquid ink then flows through four channels carved onto the table's surface, converging at a central hole and leaking through a funnel to a catheter, which passes through an orifice on the floor. This infusion pipe guides the dripping ink into a fiberglass vessel shaped like a calabash gourd that is located downstairs in the Crystalloid hall. In a masterful stroke of triple-entendre, Qiu positioned this juice-yielding inkstone table in between two large wall-mounted photographs of the North and South entrance gates to the Nanjing Bridge. With its diligent inky power engines running like tireless motorcars, and capped by the frontal views of the two entrances, red flags and all, the table's elongated profile emerges as a double of the Nanjing Bridge. This bridge is the visual centerpiece of Qiu's Archive, but it is also a linchpin that connects Clinic with Crystalloid through Archive.

Figure 9. Crystalloid: Ink runs from the ink-producing machine above into this fiberglass vessel shaped like a calabash gourd. Mao's quotation is on the wall behind, with crows on the floor. Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi *by Qiu Zhijie, Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. (Photo by Qiu Zhijie)*

Act I, Scene 2

Recycling Visuality—Echoes

As a site-specific installation, the ink-producing table exemplifies total art's propensity for synthesis: it is a prop that belongs to Archive but also complements other spheres of the work. As an independent sculpture, however, this studious table recalls the crow metamorphosis ritual I described earlier. Qiu poetically names this ink-producing machine *Yan de lunhuei* (The Transmigration of the Smoke), which evokes the cyclical process of material transformation. "The coal becomes the smoke; the smoke becomes the ink stick; the ink stick becomes the liquid ink; the liquid ink can produce writing; the writing becomes inky traces; the inky traces becomes the crow; the crow becomes the coal," thus spake the total artist (2008b).

Let's translate Qiu's poetry into performative prose: Coal, when burned, produces smoke. The smoke, when congealed with oil and adhesives, turns into an ink stick. If we understand the being of an ink stick as a solid mass of mineral and chemical substances, then a way for it to travel in the world is by becoming liquid. Once liquid, the ink may join with a brush pen to facilitate calligraphy, hence acquiring a thousand faces while becoming gradually dissipated. Like human faces, the faces of these calligraphies will eventually become ashes, which will join the earth to become its dark offspring, coal. The crow is then the miracle in this cycle, ascending from the ashes and soaring up to draw an arc, before disappearing as coal. The smoke, the ink stick, the calligraphy, the crow, and the coal are therefore different stages of a cyclical continuum.

But what about the hands that mold the crow, and the feet that smash it?

Qiu remarked in our email exchange that there are "two engines" in *The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi*: "One is the ink-producing machine; the other the two workers engaged in remolding the crows" (2008f). We may consider an engine—as the force that propels movement—either extrinsic or intrinsic to the cycles of change. As a force with intention, the worker shapes the crows, retrieves their ashes, and re-shapes the crows. In this scenario, the worker is a stand-in for the creator, supposedly extrinsic to the creation if intrinsic to its continuation. We might conceptualize this creator/engine figure as "artist" or "god," a being who hovers over and exists prior to the creation. In another scenario, the self-revolving ink-producing machine exerts a force without intention; obeying the rules of mechanical propulsion, it appears neither intrinsic nor extrinsic to the ink stick. In fact, the ink stick cannot be detached from the process of its own transformation. Perhaps we may call the mechanism that both enables and is part of the ink stick's transformation "time." Here metaphysics is intertwined with physics: the symbolism remains loose enough for viewers to imagine their preferred narratives.

I prefer to imagine this tale of two engines as a parable for visuality, a koan for my retinae. A vision gets recycled from here to there to there and back again. I follow the trails of visuality through the air, the water, the metal, the plastic, the wood, and the coal-laden ground; my eyes drink with curiosity and thirst for more recycled sights, shifting as they shimmer and molt. But why? Toward what end do my pupils dilate? The answer to what transmutes my vision as it drifts through elements and ultimately to what drives my desire to see the phenomenal world, are buried in the cave, hidden inside the heart of a crow.

Act III, Scene 2

A Crow in the Coal and a Coal in the Crow

Much like an ink stick, a pile of ash, or transmigrating smoke, a crow is a being in time. According to ancient Chinese folk beliefs, the crow is an auspicious sign foretelling impending fortune and glory (*Baidu Baike* 2008a). While the crow as a symbol acquired some sinister aspects after the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD), the extensive body of Confucian literature continues to revere the bird as a filial animal that cares for its aging parents. Considering that the Confucian tradition has made an aggressive comeback in post-Mao China (Liu 2003:164–90), we may reasonably regard the crow as an idealized figure, even a mythic alter ego, for a Chinese person. This indigenous dimension is present yet restrained in *The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi*, as Qiu engages in the open dialectic of simultaneously alluding to distinctive Chinese sources and stressing their non-region-specific multivalence.

An installation piece in Crystalloid encapsulates such noncommittal ambiguity. Bodies of taxidermed crows lie scattered on the ground below five coal-inscribed Chinese characters on the wall: "Zhi yao you le ren" (when there is a person), an excerpt from the remarks by Mao Zedong cited on the 30 December 1968 edition of the *People's Daily*. Even the font used for the wall lettering imitates the original newspaper. Qiu uses a "neither-nor" tactic for his wall installation: by imitating his source, he neither forsakes it, nor does he repeat the original

context. While Qiu's sculptural arrangement turns the crows into surrogates for *ren* (a person or people), this person's identity remains unconfirmed. By isolating the phrase and removing it from the original passage in which Mao praises the value of (Chinese) people and the inspiring guidance of the Communist Party, Qiu tones down the phrase's nationalistic/revolutionary relevance, modulating the excerpt to make it a stateless, existential contemplation. Qiu's subtext therefore transfers the phrase—when there is a person—from its explicit Chinese political framework up onto the generic human plateau.

Figure 10. Crystalloid: Qiu's installation of "When there is a person" from Chairman Mao. Taxidermied crows with coal remnants are strewn across the floor below. Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi *by Qiu Zhijie, Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. (Photo by Qiu Zhijie)*

The juxtaposition of the crow and the coal provides a constant visual motif in both Crystalloid and Think Tank. The coal and crow pairing used in the Crystalloid wall installation offers a spatial haiku for the cycles of life and death. Intriguingly, the coal, as the substance materializing the phrase "When there is a person," is associated with birth (wherein a person appears), while the taxidermal crows connote death. This life/coal and death/crow doubling is reversed when we enter another part of Crystalloid, where the crow metamorphosis ritual takes place. In this living diorama inside an archaeological mine, the crows are literally made of coal. Crows and coal are interchangeable as materials. The cyclical actions performed by the two workers align the crow with birth and the coal—in its ashen form—with death. If we take the crow as a mythic equivalent of "ren" (a human being), then the coal's presence foreshadows the human being's future as a fossil.

I suggest, however, that the point of discerning such a reversal in the hermeneutic positions of the crow and the coal is not to stress the artist's clever variations but instead to understand that the creature and the mineral, or rather the process of birthing and of dying, are mutually implicated—intertwined, even concurrent—for all earthly beings. The artist seems to reinforce such an understanding as he places an abundant amount of taxidermed crows on top of, next to, below, and in between the coal-coated railings of a bridge leading from Archive to Think Tank.

Act III, Scene 3

A Bridge for Lingering but Not for Leaning

The major structure that spatially configures Think Tank is a bridge stretching from the corridor into the main body of Exhibition Hall D. Calling this installation a bridge is a paradox. Its structure is modeled after a *Jiu qu qiao* (literally, a nine twisted bridge), which is a classical southern Chinese garden landscaping ornament featuring nine twists and turns in the bridge's composition (*Baidu Baike* 2008b). Yet the bridge in Think Tank doesn't cross any water; rather, it creates a tortuous path impeding a viewer's speedy passage. Not calling this installation a bridge, nevertheless, would seem an oversight. Wall-to-wall photographs of the Yangzi River flank the corridor where Qiu's twisted bridge first appears, conveying the illusion that we are passing above flowing water. Qiu's bridge also includes verisimilar artifacts from the Nanjing Bridge: a series of decorative carvings created during the height of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Qiu and his student team painstakingly did rubbings of these carvings on the actual bridge in

Figure 11. Qiu's twisted bridge passage configures the space in Think Tank. Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi *by Qiu Zhijie, Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. (Photo by Qiu Zhijie)*

order to reproduce the panels as coal plates. Qiu has designed his twisted passage as a displaced echo of the Nanjing Bridge.

Qiu's twisted bridge-passage offers an alternative to the value systems responsible for the place the Nanjing Bridge holds in the Chinese national imaginary. Through his voluminous interviews with suicide survivors and family members of suicide victims, the artist discovered that most people are drawn to kill themselves at the Nanjing Bridge for rather mundane reasons: jilted love, loss of employment, failing a college entrance exam, insufficient money, domestic violence, bankrupt credit, and poor health (Qiu 2008c, also 2008e)—arguably all situations made desperate by the withdrawal of a social safety net and the dissolution of the extended familial structure in China's effectively post-communist reform era. Did those Nanjing Bridge suicide victims seek to erase their personal humiliations by drowning in a water-logged monument of (erstwhile) national pride? Through its pensive twists and

Figure 12. The blood note found by Qiu on the railing of the Nanjing Bridge: "When love disappears like smoke, the only thing left for me is to forget love." Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi *by Qiu Zhijie, Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. (Photo by Qiu Zhijie)*

turns, Qiu's "ataractic" bridge distances itself from the reasons that have driven ordinary people to instantaneous self-annihilation. To know how the artist interprets some of the collective traumas hidden beneath these personal reasons, we have to search for keys in Qiu's Think Tank. But on this transitional passage, we can almost grasp Qiu's own attitude regarding the matter at hand. The artist's alternative bridge voices unflinchingly his objections to impulsive suicides.[2]

Our first clue comes from the name given to this bridge transition between Archive and Think Tank: "Mo ping lan" (literally, "Don't Lean on Rails"). This lyrical name is an excerpt from a verse by Li Yu (937–978), a prince and poet from the historical period known as Wu dai shi guo (Five Dynasties and Ten Countries) (see *Baidu Baike* 2008c). Li's two-stanza poem meditates on the nature of life as dreams whose dreamers have forgotten their transient status as guests. Zeroing in on the experience of crossing a bridge, the poet urges himself to appreciate the undulating vistas from afar rather than to lean on the bridge's rail, gazing at the watery depth and becoming consumed by solitary sorrow. "Li shi rongyi jian shi nan" (It's easier to part [from here] than to see [here] again), muses Li, reflecting perhaps on his own precarious political station.[3] Translating the poet's whispers to his wounded ego into plainer prose: "You will die soon enough, why should you become grief-ridden over any temporary distress?" As if to match Li's philosophical equanimity with a positive action, Qiu makes his bridge rails such that they cannot be leaned on, heavily coated as they are with pungent-smelling coal and safeguarded by the myriad mythic crows.

Qiu reiterates his opposition to suicide in a video document of a live performance he staged on the Nanjing Bridge, shown on a monitor set into the corridor wall. In January 2008, Qiu found a suicide note written in blood on the bridge's railing, which read, "Dang ai yan xiao yun san, wo shen xia de zhiyou wang qing" (When love disappears like smoke, the only thing left for me is to forget love). On 14 June 2008, Qiu went to the same spot, erased the original writing, cut open his index finger, and inscribed different graffiti in his own blood: "Ma da jia si jia de shoudu zai nali?" (Where is the capital of Madagascar?) "Why Madagascar?" I asked the calligrapher. And Qiu replied, "Because nobody here knows where it is" (2008c).

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2. Qiu concedes that there are political and aesthetic reasons for suicide, but he notes that most suicides committed on the Nanjing Bridge were not for these reasons (see 2008d).

3. This is my approximate translation of a verse that can be read in many different ways. The same regrettable disclaimer applies to my interpretation of Li's poem.

Figure 13. Qiu wiping off the blood note he found on the railing of the Nanjing Bridge. Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi *by Qiu Zhijie, Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. (Photo by Qui Zhijie)*

Figure 14. Qiu's new blood note: "Where is the capital of Madagascar?" Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi *by Qiu Zhijie, Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. (Photo by Qiu Zhijie)*

Madagascar is, then, a riddle. During the split second when I decide to throw myself off the bridge, would this riddle disrupt my frantic determination, thus permitting me to linger on a moment longer?

Act III, Scene 4

An Index in a Map

Like the nine-twisted bridge that frames its entrance, the Think Tank is also a paradox. This hall holds a remarkable selection of sketches, engravings, and etchings of original prints and mixed media on paper. What unifies these diverse works are the themes, which revolve around the political significance of the city of Nanjing and its eponymous bridge in China's dynastic and revolutionary histories. As Qiu informs us, these artworks are derived from his initial drawings in which he planned out performances and installations for his larger *Suicidology* project. The displayed artworks then function as both Qiu's foundation and as road maps: As a foundation, they were visualized in the past; as road maps, they are provisions for the future. In fact, most of the performance and installation plans charted out on the folios displayed have yet to be realized as three-dimensional artworks. Thus, for the total artist, this Think Tank performs a double role: it is both an index for Qiu's ongoing *Suicidology* series and an integral part of *The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi*.

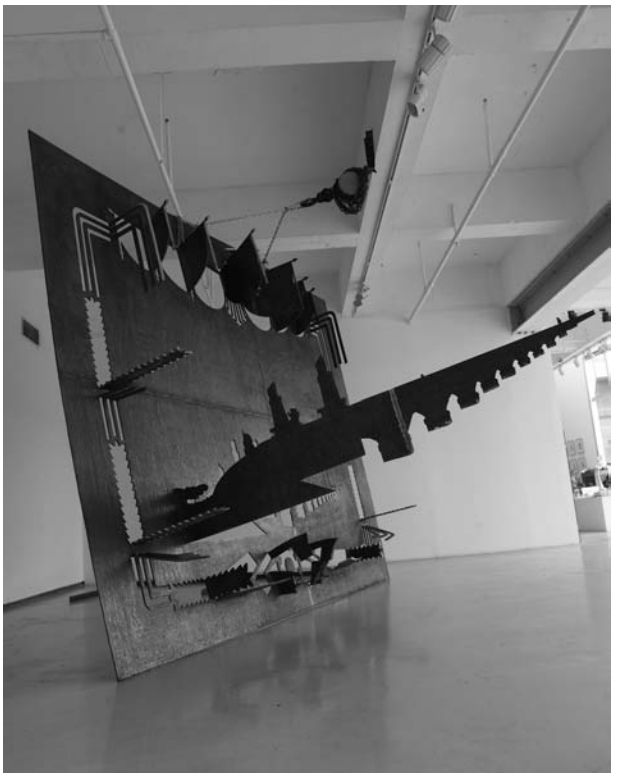

Figure 15. The frontispiece: An award certificate cast in iron, displayed in the front entrance hall of Zendai MoMA. Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi *by Qiu Zhijie. (Photo by Qiu Zhijie)*

Ironically, Qiu's Think Tank is also an anti-think tank. Unlike a common think tank, in which a group of experts is dedicated to problem solving, Qiu's Think Tank *presents*—rather than solves—*problems*. In their convoluted fashion, Qiu's plans for the *Suicidology* series appear to contradict precisely the kind of political, economic, and military interests that a government- or corporate-sponsored think tank upholds. Exploring the potential reasons why the Nanjing Bridge has become a magnet for potential suicide among ordinary Chinese, Qiu exposes the historical pathos of the city of Nanjing and the revolutionary mythologizing of the Nanjing Bridge. The political and ideological ramifications of these two Nanjing identities—as historical capital for weaker dynasties and as a nationalistic bridge for the communist China—are a source of chronic communal psychosis; the countless suicides are festering symptoms of this malady.

Emblematic of Qiu's contemplation of these issues is a sculpture that appears at the front entrance to Zendai. This frontispiece is a magnified version of the most popular type of Chinese award certificate, conventionally a thick piece of paper imprinted with the image of the Nanjing Bridge. We see many samples of these certificates in Archive. Qiu's blown-up certificate, however, is made of one centimeter-thick rusted iron, and its decorative patterns—including the Nanjing Bridge in

Figure 16. A process shot of Qiu and his student team installing The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi/I*, Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. (Courtesy of Qiu Zhijie)*

silhouette—are cut into the square and then bent forward, protruding from the surface. Qiu further sharpened these protrusions to make their edges like knives. An award certificate is normally a record of society's acknowledgment of an individual's achievement; but here it becomes a weapon, one that drives a person breathlessly forward and threatens with malice when s/he falls behind. If the recipient of this award certificate has to labor under the weight of success, then what about those who fail to attain such social recognition? Should they commit suicide? Or should they rest under the shadow cast by this rusty iron square?

No salvation is offered in *The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi*. In Think Tank, however, Qiu has envisioned certain proposals, not as solutions for those who wish to transcend the cycle of crows and coal, but as a tranquillizer—a momentary calming agent—for those who ever contemplate suicide.

Act III, Scene 4

Suicidology 101

One of the proposals on view in Think Tank materializes as the exhibition's title piece: a giant calabash gourd made of clear fiberglass, with a steel cap shaped like a hypodermic needle. Black butterflies flutter, pause, or lie still inside this giant calabash, which is housed in the Crystalloid section. The butterflies are able to breathe from the air coming through the hole in the huge hypodermic needle. Some butterfly food is scattered inside the calabash. A smaller fiberglass calabash rests a few feet away, serving as the container for the liquid ink dripping from the

Figure 17. Crystalloid: The giant gourd sculpture—with live butterflies—displayed in the Zendai Exhibition Hall A. Zhuang Zi de zhengjing ji/The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi *by Qiu Zhijie, Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. (Photo by Qiu Zhijie)*

ink-producing machine upstairs. Museum assistants are instructed to replace any full container with an empty one and to seal the ink-filled calabash with a hypodermic needle cap.

By juxtaposing hypodermic needles with calabashes, Qiu creates a visual conceit to address the two conceptual elements marking his exhibition title: *The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi*. The first concept becomes clear with Qiu's fiberglass gourd-sculpture: transparent calabashes equipped with needles become syringes. When needed, these syringes may be filled with the medicinal ataraxic to tranquilize those who lean too tremulously close to the edge of a bridge or window ledge. Suicidology 101 as prescribed by the total artist: persuasion through art as medicine.

But, how does Qiu's medicine relate to *Zhuang Zi*?

Most immediately, the giant calabash with resident butterflies combines two familiar allusions to the works of the Daoist poet-philosopher Zhuang Zhou (369–286 BC). When his frequent interlocutor Hui Shi complained to Zhuang about a giant calabash gourd, which can be used neither as a bottle nor as a scoop, Zhuang replied, "Why don't you tie the giant calabash around your waist as a buoy to float over streams and lakes?" (see *Da Zhonghua* 1999:10–12).[4] The freedom with which Zhuang eludes any fixity of mind, letting him see in the gourd a whole new possibility, evolves into a certain epistemic elasticity in his dream about a butterfly. Waking up from a dream where he roamed freely as a butterfly, Zhuang asked, "Did Zhou dream about the butterfly, or did the butterfly dream about Zhou?" (38–40 [translation mine]). An imaginative transposition of perspectives allows Zhuang to sidestep the division between self and other

4. I've revised the translation provided in this bilingually published edition of *Zhuangzi*.

by forgetting that there is a self. No bridge is needed between the man and the butterfly; the man is already the butterfly. Thus, *try* and we can all *fly*.

For Qiu's project, however, the "Zhuang Zi" in the title is not just an honorific name for Zhuang Zhou, nor does it merely refer to the Daoist master's thinking collected in the volumes entitled *Zhuangzi*. Rather, the signifier calls attention to a long-standing, yet somewhat submerged, spiritual heritage in China (see Little 2000). To Qiu, Zhuang Zi symbolizes "a whole system of cultural outlooks and modes of living," one that has inspired such brilliant calligraphic and literary works as "Lanting xu" (Preface to the Orchid Pavilion; by Wang Xizhi [303–361]) and "Chi bi fu" (The Red Cliffs Poetry; by Su Shi [1037–1101]) (2008d). Such a system, Qiu adds, cultivates "an anti-utilitarian aesthetic attitude and an ability to transcend the preoccupations of the moment" (2008d). It allows one "to understand the world holistically in a free and open vision" (2008d). Perhaps with such a vision, as Qiu's remark implies, a person will be able to circumvent the blind fixation that contributes to impulsive suicide.

Act IV

Calligraphic Archaeology

Zhuang Zhou did not tell us what color the butterfly in his dream was. The butterflies in Qiu's giant fiberglass calabash, however, are black, just like the crow and the coal. Black is the color of existence, of being and becoming, in *The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi.* The ink that gradually fills up the smaller calabash-syringe is also black: black is the color of Qiu's medicine.

It is revealing that Qiu would cite "Preface to the Orchid Pavilion" and "The Red Cliffs Poetry" as milestones in the cultural lineage of Zhuang Zi. Qiu first became widely known as a *xingwei* (performance) artist by copying Wang Xizhi's cursive writing for the "Preface to the Orchid Pavilion" on the same sheet of paper a thousand times (between 1990 and 1997). A decade-plus later in his present total art project, Qiu adopted the title from Su Shi's calligraphic masterpiece, "The Red Cliffs Poetry," to name his archaeological cave inside Crystalloid. Here Su's red becomes Qiu's black. In *The Ataraxic of Zhuang Zi*, other than the red calligraphic frames in Clinic, the only example of Qiu's calligraphy is his blood writing on the rail of the Nanjing Bridge: "Where is the capital of Madagascar?" In "Madagascar," I heard a rumor from a little crow: *red* equals *black*, as *blood* equals *ink*. The black ink is, then, the living blood of a calligrapher's art.

A calligrapher is an archaeologist on three levels: digging into the past; reconstructing the past through present-tense actions; and discovering history by composing history. Qiu digs into the past through his calligraphic practice—which includes routinely imitating his predecessors' writings—and through his prodigious compilation of material traces from the past. By immersing himself *totally* in what he managed to unearth, as seen in his Archive in Zendai MoMA, Qiu reconstructs the historical mythos of the Nanjing Yangzi River Bridge and exposes the bridge's relentless influence on the Chinese populace. He has rediscovered a site—one so familiar to the Chinese as to be naturalized—and deemed it worthy of an archaeological investigation that aims to uncover its layers of fabrication. Yet, Qiu's purpose is not only to call forth history for history's sake but also to bring his own temporal intervention into play. His total art actively contributes to recomposing the history of the Nanjing Bridge.

As totality encompasses opposites, the act of writing already plants the seed of its own erasure. We perform the act of seeing by simultaneously including and excluding what is unseen. To me, the deepest mystery in what Qiu summons as "a free and open vision" lies in a fleeting de-visualization of the present moment, when the one who sees plunges into the creative stream of time and suddenly remembers that *change* is always the name of the game.

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