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## Essay: Qiu Z(h)i-Jie: Artist as the Writing Hand

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## QIU ZI-JIE: ARTIST AS THE WRITING HAND

Chang Tsong-zung

Qiu Zi-jie has arrived at his current calligraphic works through a circuitous route of enquiry into problems of modern art: in particular, problems concerning the individual expression, and the dissolution of boundary between public and private discourse.

Qiu believes our world is so saturated with objects and signs that the creative mind can no longer identify its goal. Therefore, it is not 'what' an artist wants to create, but 'how' he goes about the creative process that is important. The artist may pick any subject and use any artistic style. Both will be equally valid and equally imperfect. Qiu's works in calligraphy is his answer to this dilemma in expression: when one is conscious of countless styles of representation, and needs all of them to tell the whole truth, how does one proceed?

Behind his didactic enquiry, what drives the artist is a persistent anxiety of the annihilation of self and individual expression in modern life. The overabundance of information and the dominance of public discourse leave little room for original thought and expression. An individual becomes a mere convergent point in mixed public discourses, his mode of thought and even his body language obey internalised rules and conventions.

For Qiu Zi-jie, the purpose of art is to recapture a space for the individual within this impossible situation. If no voice is genuinely personal, where then is the self? One cannot even talk of rebellion in this situation, because there is no oppressor. One disappears into the public discourses that constitute one's private condition. Qiu finds enviable the sensation of alienation in an artist such as Giacometti because he was up against an oppressing world. The world eroded the space that was Giacometti's until it became a line, and yet from this vanishing line came a shrieking proclamation of existence. Qiu is not so sure he can use this affirmative language of existentialism because alienation presupposes a condition of freedom that preceded it, which Qiu disbelieves. Qiu's strategy is to enter the game of public language and conventions: by simulating it he appropriates it for himself. He chooses the art of calligraphy as his domain. Does one's own handwriting, hiding under the shadow of others' texts, remain one's own?

Within the realm of fine art endorsed by tradition, calligraphy is considered the king of the Chinese arts. Traditionally, all the truly

worthy arts: literature, calligraphy, painting and seal-carving, are arts of the 'literati', whose primary concern is the world of logos, of words. In this order of things, calligraphy forms the basis of the visual arts. As an art which accompanies writing, calligraphy is both dependent on text and independent as a pictorial art. It leads the double existence of being a fine art and a practical skill employed in daily use. In pre-modern times, calligraphy was practised by every literate person who, in the course of their practice, came into contact with the conventions of excellence established by historical masters. It is therefore an art which is founded upon paradigms; all great calligraphers operated<sup>s</sup> within the parameters of the paradigms. Everyone copies the masters to learn calligraphy. Individuality is therefore not at odds with convention; on the contrary, freedom comes as a result of absorbing the paradigms, acknowledging and claiming them as one's own. Qiu enters the apprenticeship of this calligraphic world by copying one of the most famous calligraphic works in history. His choice of model is arbitrary although, as Qiu puts it, "the corpse of someone familiar is always more intriguing than that of a stranger's."

In *Work, Opus One* (1992-1994) Qiu Zi-jie copied a text of Wang Xi-Zhi (4th century), the *Lan Ting Preface*, one thousand times. The writing was repeated on the same sheet of paper so that it eventually became entirely black with ink. The repeated copying of a famous masterpiece is a common enough traditional practice, but repeating it in this manner highlights the conscious subjugation of the self. Neither text nor calligraphy remains, hence liberating the artist from the burden of creation. The paper is blackened after a number of copies, and thereafter Qiu writes as though on an invisible plate, the only guidance being the self-conscious adherence to calligraphic convention. The exercise of writing becomes a purely spiritual exercise, like the repetition of a prayer, or concentrated playing. This work was completed over a period of two years, from 1992 to 1994.

*Plate-Making Studio* (1995-1996) takes the practice of calligraphy to a more public domain by copying in long-hand the entire edition of the Beijing Daily onto a transparent sheet. The copying is made in the artist's own calligraphic style, and repeated for each day's newspaper for a hundred days. When the sheets are displayed in a row, all legible texts are cancelled out by the palimpsest of writing. The act of copying a newspaper appropriates symbolically a mass language for self expression, with its narrative content obliterated in the layering. But the artistic self so paintakingly established is still never securely Qiu's own except

when he is actively writing, because the uniqueness of his calligraphic touch can still be dissipated by being turned into a paradigm for others. His writing may be made a model style to be copied or, as the transparent sheets suggest, his copies can be used as the plates for mass printing. A personal voice can still be made impersonal by becoming the standard voice of the public.

In *8th April 1996* (1996) Qiu addresses this latter problem by arranging for ten writers to copy the Beijing Daily of 8th April 1996. He then takes each calligraphic style to fashion its own stencil-like letter-form. Anyone using the letter-form can imitate exactly, in long-hand, one of the personal calligraphic styles. The unique personal touch disappears into a standard type-face.

But Qiu Zi-jie knows the individual self still remains, however invisible it may be. The artist exists because his drive to work, to write, cannot be explained away. Although an arbitrary choice of style is the predicament of a finite being in a world flooded with public discourses, by adopting calligraphy as his tool Qiu subjugates himself to a tradition. The paradigms of the tradition in turn releases the artist from choice and allows him the freedom to train his mind on the writing hand. The artwork will not remain as a reified object because it is annihilated during Qiu's working process. Through his calligraphic works Qiu brings the sensibility of centuries of Chinese literati calligraphers to bear upon contemporary art. Most of these anonymous calligraphers never aspired to be artists, the writing was their daily prayer. In his two later works Qiu again contemplates the unstable dynamics between public and private discourse; but it ceases to be a problem. In forfeiting a personal style, and deleting the artwork, Qiu has slipped out of the dilemma and gained access to a discipline of the mind. The artistic self remains intact in his will to discipline.