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QIU ZHIJIE

In the shadows of history

Years of sociological research culminate in a vast body of work concerning iconic historical sites and their changing significance in contemporary China.

By Christina Yu



Qiu Zhijie working on impromptu paintings on the walls of Chambers Fine Art, New York, for his solo exhibition "Mochou: Recent Works" in March 2009. Courtesy Chambers Fine Art, New York.

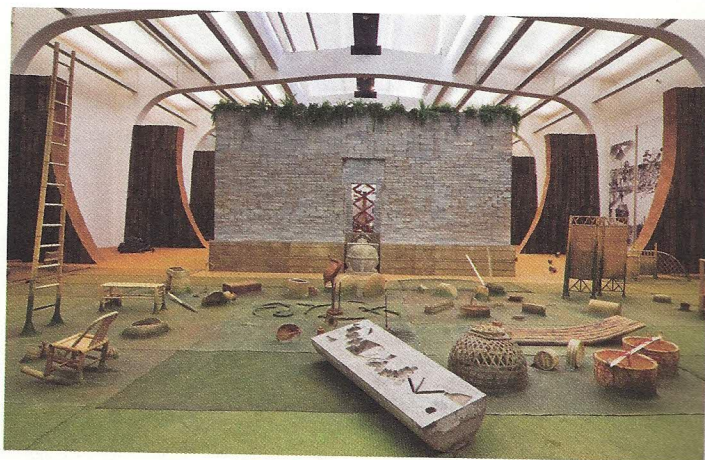
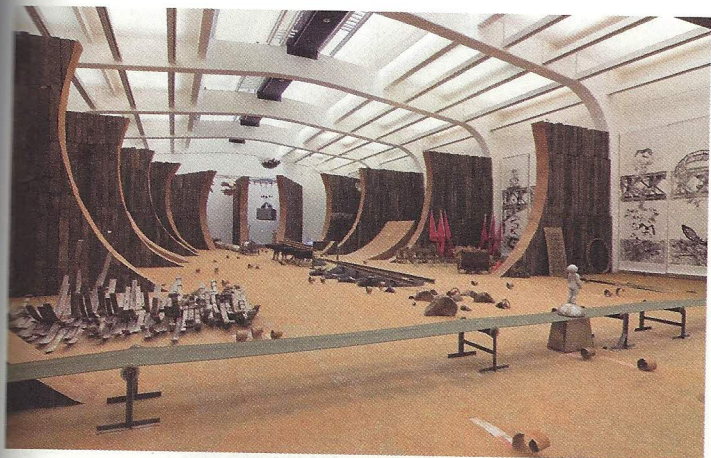
In February 2009, the Centre Pompidou in Paris held “Vides” (VOIDS), an exhibition of a dozen empty rooms, a retrospective of gallery and museum shows in which artists presented nothing, or as some argued, “air.” All of these exhibitions, which had been staged by artists ranging from Yves Klein in 1958 to Roman Ondák in 2006, were assembled according to the artists’ original specifications. However, what is an artist to do when unforeseen circumstances force him to work with an empty exhibition space? The easiest solution would be to leave the space empty. To do so would add to the history of empty galleries presented as art, and could even be interpreted as a statement of protest.

At the same time as the Centre Pompidou was staging “Vides,” Qiu Zhijie faced this very challenge. On March 11, one day before the scheduled opening of his solo exhibition “Mochou” at Chambers Fine Art in New York, he learned that his paintings were still being held by the United States Customs Service. No clear explanation was given, and the shipping company’s promise to resolve the problem “the next day” lasted for almost two weeks. Forced to improvise, Qiu spent 24 hours working nonstop on wall-to-wall murals, a rich, detailed tapestry of motifs painted with Chinese ink and brush, including seashells, a pine tree, a ladder to the sky, a vineyard and Himalayan mountains. Together, they presented an encyclopedia of the world, sprouting from a book held open in a baby’s hands. Visitors could spend hours poring over all the details.

Qiu’s ability to conceive and realize such a complex project in

such a short time is partly due to his extensive involvement with contemporary society and his vast knowledge of history and culture. Though he was caught off guard at short notice, he was able to draw on a broad repertoire of ideas and images, or as he calls it, a “think tank” that already exists in his mind. To transform these ideas and images into art pieces, Qiu has spent years developing a method of *zongti yishu*, translated loosely as “total art.” What he intends to encompass in this method is not only different art forms—an idea developed by the 19th-century German composer Richard Wagner to integrate performing arts, literature and visual arts—but also sociology, anthropology, philosophy, psychology and other branches of the humanities.

Qiu was born in 1969 in Zhangzhou, Fujian province. A visit to the nearby city of Xiamen in his late teens changed the path of his life. There he encountered the work of the Xiamen Dada group, founded in the mid-1980s by artists such as Huang Yong Ping, Cha Lixiong and others who were inspired by the work of the European Dada artists, who sought to destroy traditional artistic values and forge a new form of expression during the 1920s. During that visit, Qiu realized that art can differ from traditions he had practiced, such as Chinese calligraphy. Between 1988 and 1992, he studied at the printmaking department of the prestigious Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the China Academy of Art) and was soon recognized as a star student. As with many of Qiu’s contemporaries, the government’s crackdown on prodemocracy



Installation view of “Qiu Zhijie: Breaking Through the Ice” at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2009. Photos by Oak Taylor-Smith. Courtesy Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing.

The Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge became a monument to

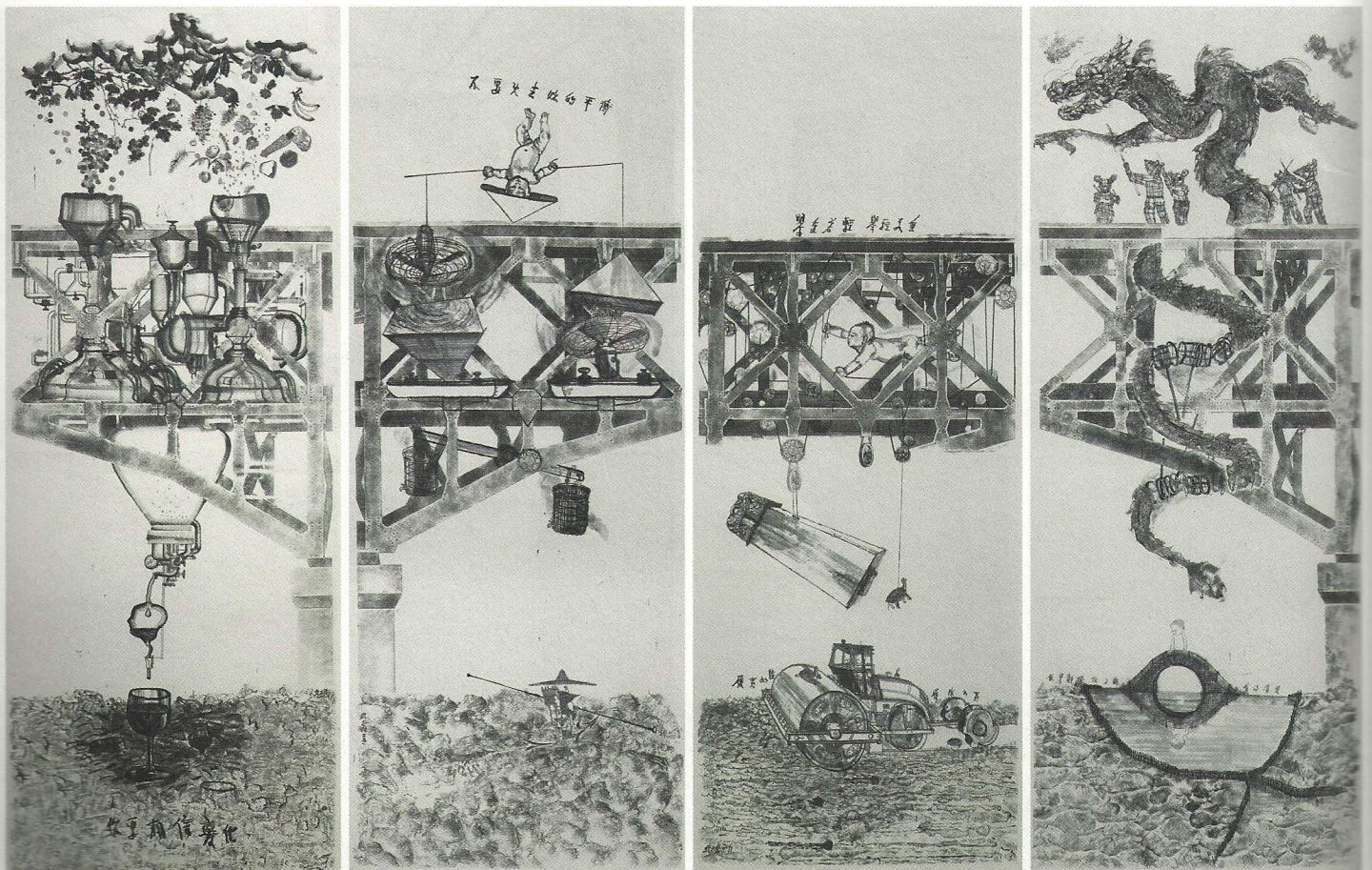
protesters in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 had shattered his dream of a democratic and socially forward China. Qiu and his peers shied away from overt social engagement and turned to history and philosophy. Following graduation, he became one of the most active artists in the burgeoning contemporary art scene in 1990s China, and his photograph *Tattoo II* (1994) brought him international recognition. The work depicts the artist standing against a white wall, the Chinese character *bu* (“no”) is written in bright red paint across his naked chest and extending onto the wall behind, erasing the three-dimensionality of his body. The self-negation in the image foreshadowed the sense of diminished uniqueness that the young artist felt as his fame grew.

Delving into both Chinese and Western history and philosophy, Qiu significantly expanded and enriched his “think tank,” which led him to develop his idea of “total art,” best exemplified in his recent, ambitious and ongoing project, “A Suicidology of the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge” (2007–). Built in 1968, the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge runs across the Yangtze River, which divides China into north and south, both geographically and culturally. Although it was not the first modern highway and railway bridge to link northern and southern China, it was the first to be designed and built solely by Chinese engineers and workers. For this reason, it

became a monument to China’s national progress during Chairman Mao’s Cultural Revolution (1966–76).

The bridge is an omnipresent image that appears, often together with the national flag, on mugs, pins, photo frames, textbooks and government-issued certificates. And yet, as Qiu discovered during his research, it is also the site with the highest number of reported suicides in China. Since its completion, over 2,000 people have jumped from its 30-meter height into the waters below, significantly exceeding the 1,300 people who have killed themselves at the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco—a world-renowned suicide spot—since its completion in 1937. Qiu was intrigued by these seemingly paradoxical aspects of the Nanjing bridge. On the one hand, it is a symbol of national pride; on the other hand, it is a place where thousands have committed the ultimate act of resignation.

Qiu researched the bridge’s design and history, the city of Nanjing and the people who travel there to end their lives. Besides reading books, he also worked with suicide-prevention volunteers, and interviewed suicide survivors and the families of those who have committed suicide. “A Suicidology of the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge” encompasses a wide range of media—painting, sculpture, frottage, installation, photography, video and performance—and was first exhibited at the Zendai Museum of Modern Art in Shanghai



30 LETTERS TO QIU JIAWA, 2009.

a series of ink on paper, 500 x 190 cm each. Photos by Oak Taylor-Smith.
Courtesy UCCA, Beijing

China's national progress during the Cultural Revolution.

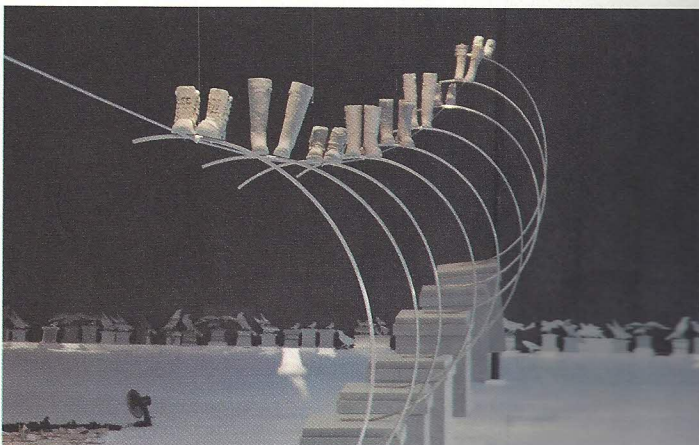
in 2008. So far, works from the project have been presented in exhibitions at three other art institutions across the globe: "The Bridge, Nanjing Under the Heaven" at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (2008), "Breaking Through the Ice" at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing (2009) and "Twilight of the Idols" at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin (2009).

Though Qiu sometimes exhibits the same work at different venues, the display changes. For example, memorabilia that bears the image of the bridge was shown on the wall in Singapore but was half-hidden in the ground in Beijing. For the exhibition in Beijing, he made a series of monumental ink paintings, "30 Letters to Qiu Jiawa" (2009), with the compositions of each three-meter-tall sheet of paper connected by the image of the bridge running horizontally across. Entwined with the bridge are images of babies, birds, wings, skeletons, flags and vines. Both supporting and arching over this multiplicity of motifs and scenarios, the bridge is presented as ubiquitous in Chinese life.

In the exhibitions, Qiu also created clinics that advocated artistic therapy as a means to treat people who have attempted suicide. One of the clinics displays multiple copies of rubbings taken from a stone relief at Swallow Rock—a scenic area in Nanjing where poetry has been carved into stone tablets, one of which, written by

the renowned scholar and educator Tao Xingzhi (1891–1946), reads *xiang yi xiang si bu de* ("Think it over, do not die"). People who had attempted to commit suicide were invited to make rubbings from the stone as part of therapy, and their works were also displayed in the exhibitions.

The formation of Qiu's "total art" approach can be traced to his participation in the ongoing "Long March Project – A Walking Visual Display," an important turning point in his career. Beginning in 2002, Qiu and curator Lu Jie led Chinese and international artists—including Cai Guo-Qiang, Hong Hao, Shen Xiaomin, Sui Jianguo, Song Dong, Yin Xiuzhen and Feng Mengbo—to retrace the Long March of the Red Army (1934–36), which traversed more than 6,000 miles to evade the pursuing nationalist Kuomintang army led by Chiang Kai-shek. It is one of the most widely taught and glorified events in the history of the People's Republic. Together with the other participants in the "Long March Project," Qiu walked the entire route, observing and contemplating the impact of the historical event on the life of local people. Some villages had grown dramatically because they shaped the history of China, whereas others remained poor. During his travels he wore a pair of specially made shoes, with the Chinese character for "right" carved into the left sole and vice versa. Every time he stepped into mud



(Clockwise from Top Left) Diplomas from Qiu Zhijie's Nanjing Yangtze Bridge archive; **THE CRYPTICAL ROVERS**, 2009; **WHO WERE THE HAPPIEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD?**, 2009; **MA YUAN AFTER THE REVOLUTION - UNDULATION**, 2009. Installation view at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2009. Photos by Berthold Stadler. Courtesy the artist.

To the Chinese people, the significance of the Lugou Bridge does not

or puddles of water, the shoes would print the characters on the ground. Talking with *ArtAsiaPacific* in May, Qiu said, "This piece was connected to the symbolic and political meaning of the two words, 'right' and 'left.' They can be elusive and there is only a thin line that divides them."

When the march reached Luding Bridge in Sichuan province, Qiu staged a performance in which he walked past the bridge blindfolded. In the official textbook narration of the historical Long March, several episodes are singled out as important. Among them is the crossing of the bridge, which tells of the Kuomintang army destroying the bridge, leaving only iron chains, in order to impede the Red Army's progress. The Red Army soldiers crossed the river by crawling along the chains, with bullets flying over their heads and rushing waters flowing below. Their passage to the other side, where they continued to fight, is one of the most crucial moments in the entire journey. In his performance, however, Qiu easily walked across without looking at the structure beneath him. This simple act, in the context of his "Long March Project," raised questions about which events are documented, and the reliability of official histories. "It was a tactic to visualize and dramatize the occasional blindness of how we retell history and stories," the artist explains.

This relationship between permanence and transience is

further explored in Qiu's "Light Writing: Change" series of long-exposure photographs, which depict the artist writing in the air with a flashlight at night. In contrast with his fleeting actions in the foreground, Qiu carefully chooses the sites in the background for their historical significance. In *It's Changed - Lugouqiao* (2007), the composition is bisected by the Lugou Bridge, one of the oldest stone multiarch bridges in China (first built in 1189 and reconstructed in 1698), which spans the Yongding River south of Beijing. It is known in English as the Marco Polo Bridge because the eponymous 13th-century Venetian traveler praised its beauty in his diary. To the Chinese people, however, the significance of the bridge does not lie in its architectural elegance, but in its military and political history. On July 7, 1937, the Imperial Japanese Army assaulted the bridge and within weeks captured Beijing (now Beijing) and Tianjin, an incident that sparked the eight-year-long Sino-Japanese War.

In Qiu's image, two recreational boats are in the foreground, symbols of China's new consumerism that appear in stark contrast with the heroism and revolutionary spirit invested in the Lugou Bridge. The river is dry and the two boats are a forlorn sight, beached and crumpled. In order to celebrate the bridge's 800th anniversary in 1992, the local government refilled the river with water and created a recreational park. However, these were not



(Left) **ALL THE PAST TIMES WERE PERFECT**, 2008, mixed media on cast paper, 196.6 x 151.8 x 1.9 cm.
(Right) **WHEN LOVE VANISHES INTO THIN AIR**, 2008, mixed media on cast paper, 196.2 x 151.8 x 2.5 cm.
Courtesy Singapore Tyler Print Institute.

lie in its architectural elegance, but in its military and political history.

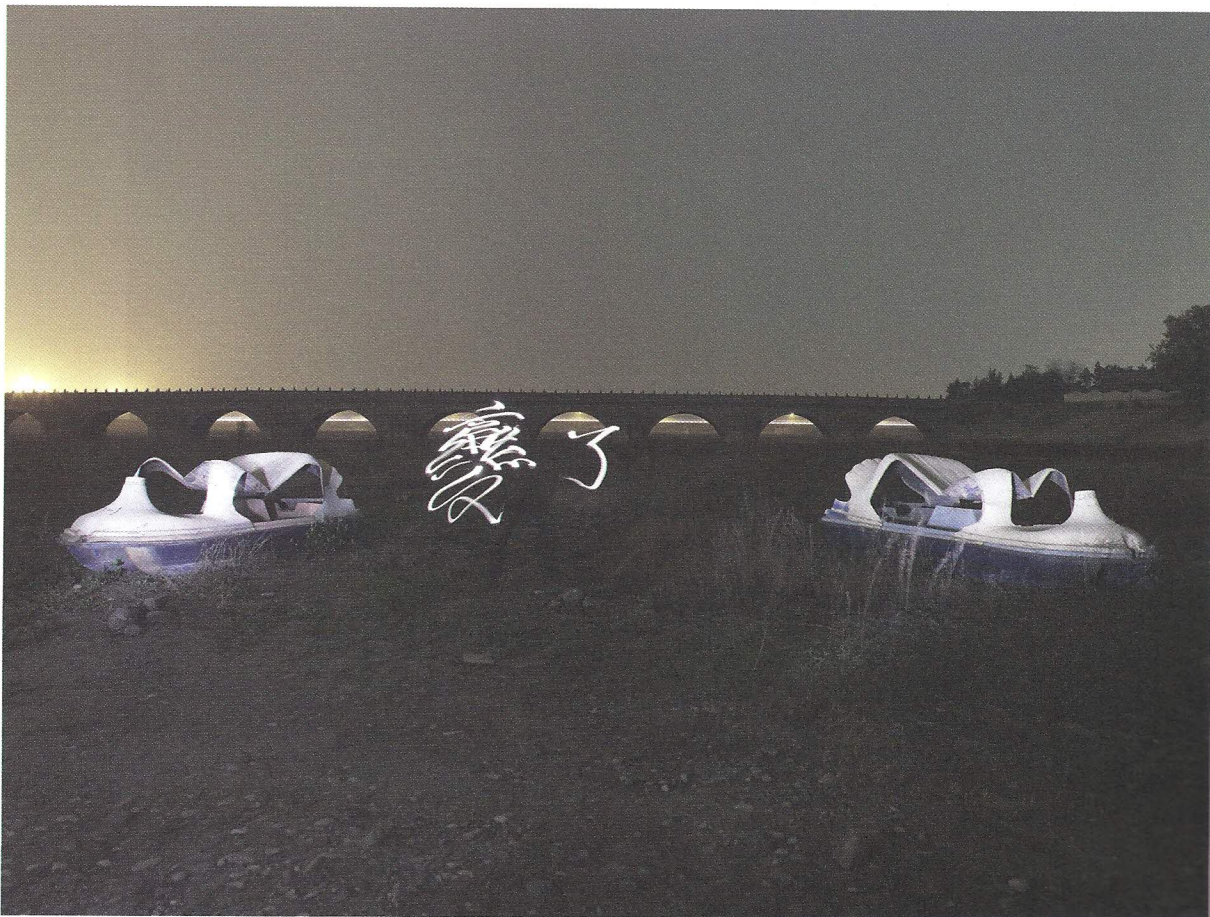
sufficiently maintained, and the water slowly dried up. Qiu stands between the two boats, his body rendered almost imperceptible by the long exposure as he writes the Chinese characters *bian le* (“it’s changed”). What has changed remains ambiguous. Whether it is the significance of the Lugou Bridge, the people who grant importance to it, or both, remains open to interpretation.

Qiu used similar compositional elements to explore the contemporary construction of history and the value we attribute to monuments and locations in an early video entitled *Landscape* (1999). The work consists of two screens facing each other. On one of them, a series of images of people taking photographs move by rapidly. An unchanging background of a stone stele stabilizes the scene. The stele is known as *santan yinyue* (“Three Pools Mirroring the Moon”) and was erected to praise three stone lanterns set in the water in West Lake, a famed beauty spot in Hangzhou. On the other monitor, Qiu’s face appears in front of slow-motion footage of monuments and historical sites around the world. The work alludes to the trappings of tourism and souvenirs; instead of enjoying the beautiful scenery of West Lake, the tourists seem to be more interested in taking souvenir snapshots of the stele.

Returning to “A Suicidology of the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge,” Qiu paid particular attention to themes of immutability

and transience for “Twilight of the Idols” at the Haus der Kulturen de Welt, where he installed black paper cutouts of many Berlin monuments onto the museum’s large windows. On sunny days, the cutouts cast monument-shaped shadows on the floor that changed shape with the sun’s movement during the day. These subtle changes at once romanticize the monuments while also questioning their solidity. Placed in front of the cutouts was a high cement block. Unlike a conventional plinth that raises the monument as a symbol of respect and awe, Qiu’s is adorned with a color neon sign that reads “forget me.” The work both appears to deny the commemorative function of monuments, and yet the neon message screams for attention, recognition and romanticization.

Like many of his contemporaries who reached adulthood in the 1980s, Qiu has observed the social changes that have drastically affected everyday life in China. Seeing how issues of history and memory also shape social identity and behavior, he aims to make art that surpasses an expression of the individual and reaches out to a broader audience. If we understand Qiu’s “total art” as an effort to embrace the world we live in, then it is not difficult to understand why he started his murals at Chambers Fine Art with the “Image of the World,” emerging from a book in a child’s hands. From this book the universe unfolds.



IT'S CHANGED - LUGOUQIAO,
from the “Light Writing: Change” series, 2007, long-exposure photograph, 120 x 160 cm.
Courtesy Chambers Fine Art, New York.