

The Intersection between Calligraphy and Contemporary Art: The Possibility of Mutual Inspiration and Contribution between the Two

Fung Yee Lick, Eric

The Distance Between Calligraphy and Contemporary Art

The art of Chinese calligraphy has a long history and has formed an independent and solid system wholly onto itself with its own techniques, objectives, aesthetics, and other criteria for evaluating the quality of works, creating its own language. The fact that it is a linguistic system means that it excludes those who cannot grasp the language. On the other hand, Western art has come a long way since modernism, and after the influence of deconstructionism in the post-modern era, contemporary art aims to challenge and shatter all kinds of barriers, even the definition of what art itself is. The world of art is now a vast and varied one, and its influence has become so far-reaching with globalization that even East Asia, with its strong cultural traditions, has had to keep pace.

Here comes the question: if art is the common language of humanity, why does calligraphy seem to be so far removed from contemporary art in general, if it is also (visual) art? For example, in a thematic contemporary art exhibition, the mediums used may include photography, video, installation, performance, mixed media, and so forth. There would also be a lot of old media such as painting or sculpture, or a mixture of old and new media, but it is rare to see calligraphy in the same place as other media. Why is that?

Calligraphy has a hard shell that makes it difficult to integrate with other media or respond to every issue out there, because calligraphy itself is a highly abstract art form made up of lines and symbols that are the remnants of the refinement and purification of all visible images in the outside world by the calligrapher's mind, hand, and eye, or to quote Zhang Huaiguan, a renowned calligraphy theorist from the Tang Dynasty: encompassing a thousand different matters in the face of one. Therefore, to add something to a form that has already been honed and polished into sublimation is to paint the lily, and would be akin to taking a step backwards in civilization. However, as an art form, calligraphy must have an inherent drive to innovate and evolve, so there have been quite a number of experiments in "modern callig-

raphy” and even “contemporary calligraphy” in East Asia, in order to expand the boundaries of calligraphy to catch up with trends in contemporary art and find its meaning in that context.

What most people think and act upon is the belief that calligraphy needs to “become contemporary”. But rarely do we think in the opposite direction, that contemporary art needs calligraphy. This does not mean that calligraphy does not need to change (and in fact it has not remained unchanged since its inception). Rather, the matter requires thinking from a fundamentally different standpoint. Allow me to use point of contact in mathematics to visually describe the relationship between the two. A tangent is the only point of contact between a circle and a straight line, with calligraphy being the circle and contemporary art being the straight line. When the circle and the straight line are completely separated, it means that calligraphy has no contact with contemporary art; either they are repeating their own words within the confines of their own traditions, or calligraphy is being forced to become a wolf in “innovative” clothing when, in fact, it has not touched the essence of contemporary art. If the straight line runs through the circle, then contemporary art has completely dissected calligraphy, and calligraphy simply becomes fodder for contemporary art. Having the circle and the straight line meet beautifully at just one point—which belongs to both the circle (calligraphy) and the straight line (contemporary art)—is the perfect state in which each gently touches the other without losing itself. To find this point is to answer the question of the value of calligraphy in the world of contemporary art, and at the same time to understand calligraphy in the context of contemporary art, rather than leaving it behind closed doors.

Further discussion is bound to touch upon what constitutes contemporary art, which would be difficult and unnecessary to define¹, but when we compare works that are widely recognized as contemporary art, we may find some common ground. Since Duchamp’s *Fountain* came into the world like a comet shooting across the sky, the subversive nature of post-modernism has gradually replaced the “art for art’s sake” purity of modernism, with far-reaching implications. These probably include: (1) Art and beauty have become separated, and an artwork is the evidence of the artist’s process of thinking, interrogating, questioning, and experimenting, rather than an aesthetic final product. (2) Anything, even an act, has the potential to become art, depending on the context, blurring the line between art and non-art (e.g., everyday actions), and therefore contemporary art is supposed to be highly permissive of the artist’s medium, concerns, how and where the artwork is presented, and even the artist’s identity itself². Works that are considered the classics of contemporary art today contain both of these qualities to a certain extent, and this is what separates them from modern and traditional art.

Thus, contemporary art is not a style; it is a set of methods of thinking and practicing that examines and even criticizes art itself. *Fountain* raises the ultimate question of “What is art?”, and many subsequent works ask the same question about different media, such as “what is painting”³, “what is music”⁴, “what is sculpture”⁵, and so on. This being the case, coming back to calligraphy, it is logical to ask “what is calligraphy” in order to explore the nature and boundaries of calligraphy. The importance of this question is to understand its inherent limitations as an artistic medium and to avoid the misconcep-

tion that some works contain elements of calligraphy without enriching or extending it to the calligraphic system, and serve only as the realization of a practice that uses calligraphy as a source of material for contemporary art. In short, art that can be called calligraphic art, regardless of period or style, should contain two elements⁶.

One is writing, i.e., writing with the hand or body, which relates to the nature of movement, one-offness, chance, etc., as opposed to media that do not involve the use of the body, such as digital tools.

The second is Chinese characters, including the aesthetics of imagery and thought derived from them as ideographic symbols, as well as their linguistic and literary meanings, which establishes the abstract nature of non-representation of concrete objects in calligraphy, mainly in comparison to calligraphic paintings without written language and so forth⁷.

The above can also be said to represent the boundary of the aforementioned circle of calligraphy⁸. On that basis, it is not difficult to distinguish between works that have appeared in history, and the in-vogue ones that are “related to calligraphy”; what is no longer calligraphy, and what is but has little contemporary meaning; and so forth. In addition, the combination of these two essences makes calligraphy a unique art form that is not found in any other medium, giving calligraphy the potential to complement contemporary art.

Different Types of Works that are “Related to Calligraphy”

For example, since the 1930s, the Ichi Ji Sho (few characters calligraphy) style and the Bokushou (“images in ink”) style of Japanese calligraphy have experimented with the form and composition of calligraphy as well as new ways of using ink and strokes. They pushed the boundaries of visual effects in calligraphy⁹ to pursue and explore purity of medium and form, which is a modernist idea. Likewise, Wang Dongling’s “chaotic calligraphy” is sort of a relatively new style that has developed. Experimentation with writing on different materials also counts as a modernist quest. Even if the characters are enlarged, or placed in different public spaces, they are only a unidirectional performance in front of the audience, and do not engage interactions with the public, which is supposed to be a common significance of contemporary art¹⁰. It is true that the circle representing the calligraphic system has expanded, but it has not yet reached the straight line of contemporary art.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are many works in contemporary art that use calligraphy and everything related to it as their source material, such as Xu Bing’s English block calligraphy that explores issues of language and power; Qiu Zhijie’s *Writing the Lanting Xu a Thousand Times* (1995)¹¹, which reflects on Chinese cultural traditions and identity; and Ma Ke’s *Hyper-realism: The First Joint of My Left Index Finger*¹², which is a piece of hyper-realistic literature. These works are based on existing issues commonly examined by contemporary art (e.g., linguistics, cultural theories, etc.), and use calligraphy or any subject matter related to it as material with which to create—and also think and question. Thus, the straight line of contemporary art pierces the circle of calligraphy, making calligraphy equal to other popular materials of contemporary art in terms of globalization, identity, cultural power, and more.

This is not to analyze calligraphy with the thinking of contemporary art, let alone to have calligraphy add value to contemporary art. Of course, all the above are great works of contemporary art, but they belong to a different discipline.

In Hong Kong, some people like to use traditional calligraphy to write pop lyrics¹³, which can barely be described as the usage of collage and juxtaposition—both common in post-modern art—which is separating the writing and the content of the calligraphic tradition, and replacing the ancient poems or Literary Chinese texts that traditional calligraphy usually features with pop lyrics, in an attempt to create a post-modern disharmony from the collision and the (cultural) differences between the two (i.e. traditional calligraphic forms and modern lyrics). However, it is doubtful how far this approach can go, since only the written content has been changed from long classical poems to long pop lyrics. The conversion process is so simple that the essence of calligraphy (and Chinese literature) is basically left untouched. Judging by the above, the innovation in written content by the Ichi Ji Sho style in the 1930s, which reduced lengthy texts to a few characters or even a single character, was a far more significant contribution to the advancement of novelty in calligraphy in its exploration of the unique meanings and aesthetics of Chinese characters and the blurring of the boundaries between calligraphy and painting. Moreover, even if new texts are written for calligraphy, enterprising artists should consider the relationship between the principles of form and composition and the content of calligraphy by dismantling these principles and re-organizing them into new forms. Blindly sticking to the principles dictated by tradition only shows a shallow understanding of the subtle convergence of the “rhythm” of calligraphy (writing and principles of form and composition) with the “rhythm” of Chinese literature within that tradition. Bear in mind that (the choice of) following certain forms or compositions is also a declaration of an aesthetic stance. There have also been many successful examples of writing new texts with new forms and composition, such as *Thoughts in the Silent Night—Change in Tone* (1987)¹⁴ by Hsiung Bing-Ming, and *New Poetry Series: Guarantee* (1989)¹⁵ and *The Floral Shirt on the Balcony* (2008) by Qiu Zhengzhong¹⁶.

Calligraphy and Contemporary Art's Mutual Contribution to Each Other

How can we achieve the “tangent” between calligraphy and contemporary art? This requires the continued application of contemporary art thinking. Hegel said that “art invites us to intellectual consideration” in order to understand philosophically what art is, rather than to recreate it¹⁷. The “contemporary” is what Danto referred to as the period after the end of art, when art has been elevated to philosophical self-reflection. Therefore, when we look at art, we have to “turn from sense experience to thought... in brief, to turn to philosophy.”¹⁸ In response to what Hegel and Danto have said above, it is possible to clear the fog of the way forward by simply replacing the word “art” with “calligraphy”, which coincides with Bing-Ming’s statement that “the core of Chinese culture is philosophy, and calligraphy is the core of the core of Chinese culture.” We need to go further and use philosophy to take part in the two essential elements of calligraphy, namely writing and Chinese characters as well as everything that is related to them.

Let's start with writing. Human beings write words with their hands (bodies); words are a part of language, and have inherent practical functions. Here, there are two meanings: One is that the time-linear nature of linguistic reading combined with the unrepeatability of human actions (as opposed to mechanical operations) makes calligraphy characterized by movement, irreversibility, and chance. Second, language is used in everyday life, where the practical and the aesthetic are integrated into one, similar to ceramics. The "everyday" in daily life writing means that such writing is not done for the purpose of creating a "work of art" independent of practicality; that is why calligraphers often refer to and pursue a kind of submission to nature, the unconscious, and improvisation, which in fact refers directly to the existential proposition of human consciousness rising into super-consciousness (to quote Li Zehou)¹⁹.

This is not a new discovery; Taoist philosophy has been exploring this issue for a long time—even though it began at a very different starting point from Western philosophy. Zhuangzi advocated the pursuit of the "true self", which is the self in a state of pure consciousness devoid of knowledge, emotion, and morality, in order to attain absolute freedom as a spiritual subject²⁰. He advocated methods to "discard one's knowledge", such as "fasting the heartmind" and "sitting and forgetting", in order to reach the state where "I (the true self) lose myself (the cognitive, moral, and physical self)", often paralleled by stories about the mental state of craftspeople when they are extremely absorbed in their craft, such as "Qing the Carpenter Fashioning a Bell Stand" and "Ting The Cook Butchering the Ox". Obviously, the finished bell stand and the butchered ox are not the main characters; they are only the final visual evidence of the process of "discarding one's knowledge". From the perspective of art, the focus of the artwork is on the aforementioned process; for example, the process in which Qing the carpenter concentrated on fasting for seven days, forgetting all about fame and glory, right and wrong, as well as his own body and limbs, and finally merged his "human nature with the nature of the wood" —a process that, if he were alive today, contemporary art would surely record as part of the documentation of the work.

Moreover, Zhuangzi's notion of pure consciousness is, to some extent, able to be cross-referenced with phenomenology in modern Western philosophy, both of which have at their heart the issue of pure consciousness as the spiritual subject of art²¹. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception advocates a return to perception itself²², providing a major theoretical foundation for exploring art based on a physical cognition of the world²³. In terms of calligraphy, Taiwanese artist Lin Chun-Hsien and Liang-Chih's *Writing Calligraphy with Exchanged Viewpoint* (2015) uses virtual reality technology to exchange the vision of two people, and have each of them write a straight line of calligraphy²⁴. Calligraphy has always emphasized the coordination of mind, hand, and eye, but in this instance, modern technology interferes with the visual aspect, forcing the calligrapher to write directly with his or her consciousness (mind), which rather gives one a sense of the "focusing one's mind by not seeing or listening" concept advocated by Yu Shinan in the Tang Dynasty. The result of the experiment is that both works of calligraphy looked quite interesting in an awkward way. This is similar to the way some calligraphers seek awkwardness by deliberately writing with the left hand (i.e., deliberately distancing the hand from the mind and the eyes, and

giving up writing with the right hand, which is already well-controlled by one's consciousness), but in fact it is one and the same. The "awkwardness" is the mysterious part of the self that remains in the consciousness after the removal of reason and knowledge, what the ancients called "nature". On the other hand, this artwork is also similar to the tradition of calligraphic imitation, because isn't imitation an experiment in allowing the "soul" of the ancients to enter our bodies to write? If the eye is the window to the soul, and it is possible to exchange the vision of two people, could it be that the soul was exchanged as well²⁵? Since we believe that the written word reflects a person's aura and talent, copying as a necessary method of learning calligraphy is in fact asking: What is one's "soul"? (Is it knowledge? Memory? Is it explicit memory, implicit memory, or body memory? Or is it all of consciousness?) By "entering" another person's body, is it possible to do what that person's body is capable of doing? Suppose Yan Zhenqing and I were to exchange our bodies, would the new "I" be able to write calligraphy like Yan Zhenqing? For human beings to understand the outside world and acquire knowledge, is it essential to have not only rational cognition but physical sensory cognition as well? Is it the combination of both that makes for a complete self? This is getting involved with epistemology.

Let's go back to Chinese characters. Some contemporary works explore the visual reception and perception of Chinese characters from the viewer's point of view. One should note that Chinese characters are ideographic symbols that carry imagery and meaning; not only are they different from phonograms, but they are different from computerized Chinese characters as well. Thus, we have to circle back to "writing"—the Chinese characters must be written by a person in order to evoke a unique sense of imagery and meaning when seen. When Chinese characters were first created, the secret inner workings of the world were absorbed by and hidden deep in the symbols. They do not simply comply with the notations of pronunciation; according to the linguist Cheng Baoyi, the mysterious powers of these symbols are released one by one while writing calligraphy. Combined with the meaning of the text itself, those powers make their way into the spirit of the viewers through the eye, enabling the viewers to connect with all things primordial²⁶. This is, in fact, refers to the "object metaphor" (*yuwu*) school of calligraphy theory, from which countless analogies were created since ancient history: rainwater zigzagging down the walls (*wulouhen*), the round turns of women's hairpins (*zhechaigu*), thousands of miles of clouds (*qianlizhenyun*), and ancient withered vines (*wansuiguteng*), and more. They were inspired by the calligraphers' observation of nature, and came into being because of the symbolic characteristic of Chinese characters. Hong Kong's Fung Yee-Lick's calligraphy installation, *90 ksana* (2019), makes one think about the imagery of Chinese characters through altering the presentation method of the calligraphy²⁷. The work uses the intensity and speed of flashing lights to obstruct and control the viewer's vision, letting the calligraphy leave only an afterimage in their eyes, so that the viewers must leap directly from reality to their consciousness in order to perceive the shape and meaning of Chinese characters.

But of course, calligraphy is not only an exploration of physicality or the imagery of Chinese characters. The second aspect of "writing" mentioned above is that it originates from everyday life and even-

tually touches the unconscious or super-conscious level, which makes calligraphy uniquely philosophical. In a narrower sense, the artistic consciousness of calligraphy originated with the literati of the Wei and Jin period, whose mainstream school of thought was Xuanxue (the Study of the Origin / Wei Jin metaphysics). Xuanxue was one of the divergent forms of Taoist philosophy, and the intellectuals of that time were interested in discussing metaphysical concepts and living recklessly, both of which were based on the theory of “Tao”. The literati of the Wei and Jin period interpreted Tao as an attitude of appreciation of everything from human talent and nature (Lao Sze-Kwang called it “the aesthetic self”) to the entire set of metaphysical issues. In their eyes, people in their entirety—including what they wear, what they eat, and how they carry themselves—are all subjects of appreciation, intended to be a manifestation of Tao; their literature, calligraphy, debates, and even their drinking and drug-taking were all part of their personality, presented as a subject of appreciation and through which they all tried to reach Tao (that is why it was the trend among intellectuals at the time to evaluate people by Xuanxue standards). To become a subject of appreciation, calligraphy must first be compatible with Tao, to be an object on the same level as the sun, the moon, the stars, and even the flowers and trees found in nature, rather than a work of artifice. that is, Yu Shinan referred to calligraphy as “without a fixed form” and “bearing form after experiencing and containing all things”—meaning that like everything else, calligraphy is a naturally occurring object, both accidental and inevitable. Therefore, calligraphy in the Jin period emphasized *shangyun*, which is a reverence for the rhythm that is revealed through personality. That rhythm is the same as the rhythm that flows through the world and all things, all dominated and generated by the metaphysical Tao.²⁸ To achieve such a state is beyond the reach of deliberate effort. As Zhuangzi said, “The human senses intend to stop, yet the unconsciousness still wishes to act”—one can only rely on the unconsciousness favor as a substitute for effort. As a saying goes, “The wonders of calligraphy and Tao are like chance encounters with the “gods”; they cannot be artificially forced.”²⁹ ” In modern terms, it is to have unconsciousness transcend consciousness, or to be what calligraphy calls “unaware”.

This unconscious state that the people in the Jin period sought was rooted in the everyday—art and the everyday were one, not separate from each other. Therefore, the premier form of calligraphy in history was the personal letter, which was an account of the lives of the literati. The contents of the letters are not literary classics; sometimes, they are just a few sentences describing the trivialities of life. Calligraphy is not a “work of art” that is deliberately written for the viewers’ appreciation; but it is precisely because of this inadvertence that the unconscious mind manages to overcome the dominance of consciousness and emerge, unifying hand, eye (body) and mind (heart). It is at this moment that calligraphy can touch the mysterious and still chaotic area of human consciousness, which, according to Zhuangzi, is the only area that remains connected to the heavens, the earth, and everything between them, and through which the realm of oneness with all things is reached³⁰. In addition to letters, there are three most renowned running scripts in calligraphy history, all of which contain erasing and correction of words. This shows that the ancients valued nature, innocence, spontaneity, and improvisation over artificiality, polish, and delib-

erateness— which is, in fact, the visual representation of the unconscious or super-conscious. Through calligraphy, we achieve the “naturalization of man” so that calligraphy is not only for aesthetic pleasure, nor is it an expression of emotion. It transcends human emotions, knowledge, and morality to assimilate with nature and become a philosophical issue in the construction of the body and the mind ³¹. Calligraphy that reverses rhythm is an activity that contemplates existential questions, and it has already, like Qintan and Xuanxue philosophy, gone far beyond the aesthetic pleasure of hanging a calligraphy scroll to decorate one’s home. Not to say that aesthetic pleasure is meaningless, but one should peel away the surface and dive into the essence of calligraphy, which is actually the deepest and most profound part of the self—take the classic *Lanting Xu* by Wang Xizhi as an example. Wang was the one who used calligraphy and literature to put forth the great existential line “there is nothing greater in life than life and death”. Did he write a beautiful piece of calligraphy to impress later generations, or to compete with others on technique? At that time, people often referred to calligraphy as “tasteful lines”. Therefore, to appreciate the Jin period’s calligraphy, it is not enough to look at the works of calligraphy alone. We have to look at everything in the daily life of Jin people as a subject of appreciation, but due to technological limitations in the ancient times, we are only able to use the last visual vestiges of their lives—the works of calligraphy—to try to complete the picture and imagine what their lives might have been like. If we look at it from the current point of view, in which a work in any form can be considered as art, then calligraphy, as works of art, are only complete when all the life pursuits of the Jin period calligraphers are considered as part of the whole, which is what Xu Fuguan meant by “transforming life into art” ³². In short, who we are and everything about us is an artistic medium. This completely dissolves the boundary between life and art (the ancients did not consider “art” as a separate concept like in the modern context anyway), and is comparable to many contemporary artists who devote their entire lives to art ³³.

On the other hand, we can set contemporary art and innovation aside for a moment, and have a moment of reflection. How much of the thoughtfulness that is “rhythm” can we grasp and demonstrate in the calligraphy we are currently writing, even the most traditional styles? The ancients’ pursuit of rhythm was not only in the form of calligraphy, but also as a philosophical concept to be pursued in all aspects of one’s entire life. This spirit happens to be in line with the requirements of professional contemporary artists, and it’s not for a hobby for one’s own self-cultivation, nor is it shutting oneself away from the world to perfect one’s technique. Contemporary art has erased the boundary between art and non-art (everyday life), allowing the very important but now largely ignored foundation for the art form of calligraphy—“the reverence for rhythm”, the whole persona manifested in the everyday—to reappear as an essential part of the entire “artwork”; With enough new technology to document this kind of action and, more importantly, the liberal context in which the viewer’s eyes can be opened to appreciate it all, the foundation of calligraphy has been imbued with meaning once more ³⁴. On the other hand, calligraphy experiments with the human super-conscious from the oriental philosophical perspective with its “rhythm” (the whole personality as a subject of appreciation), so that it can take its place within, and even complement, the scope

of contemporary art. In this manner, calligraphy and contemporary art have found a meeting point of mutual respect and contribution.

I am not suggesting that calligraphers nowadays should imitate the ancients' way of life and use the brush for correspondence, or that doing so is a shortcut to showing "rhythm" or to "Tao"³⁵. That is not how we live our daily life, but a deliberate attempt at a cheap imitation, and not in line with the innovative spirit of contemporary art. After the pen replaced the brush, and electronic communication replaced writing, the impact on the use of paper, brush, and ink as mediums of art is no less than the replacement of the Western figurative painting by photography, even though the combination of paper, brush, and ink seems to be the most effective at showing the subtle changes of the calligrapher's mental state. Brush strokes can vary from those resembling mountain peaks and falling rocks, to those that seem like a single thread spat by a silkworm. Such polar opposites can come from the same brush; that is the "rhythm" with which one can peer into the heart of the calligrapher. The past is behind us, never to return, and art has moved far ahead; to find the aspiration that one had in the beginning is not to go back to the beginning, but to absorb the essence of human life that has been developing all this time, and to re-present the "rhythm" of one's personality as well as the Eastern philosophy of existence in a more contemporary manner. In contemporary life, writing and its use as a means of expressing "rhythm" must be in the spirit of our own times. As Sun Guoting in the Tang Dynasty said, "Learn from the predecessors, but do not go against the spirit of the age; follow the spirit of the age, but do not succumb to its vices." While calligraphy was historically a scholarly pastime, there is no need to label it as an aesthetic solely for the literati, for the literati class are long gone. Once we trace it back to its essence, the heart of calligraphy is an issue applicable to all human beings at an elevated level of consciousness. In this regard, the Yangjiang Group's reflections in their work *Garden of Calligraphy* (2004) provided a powerful response in the form of contemporary art, pondering the meaning and aspirations of calligraphy in real life through conversations, consultations, and collaborations with different groups³⁶.

Conclusion—A Return to the World Being One

Due to its early development, calligraphy has formed an independent system wholly onto itself, and it can be said to be moving further and further away from "art", which is ever-changing. However, contemporary art thinking forces us to re-examine calligraphy, and after analysis, the ancient ideological foundation of calligraphy can be recreated with modern techniques, recapturing the vibrant vitality that the ancients had when they first discovered this unique art form. It is interesting to see how the cycle of history has come full circle and returned to its original spot.

Let me conclude with the first work of "calligraphy" in Chinese history. The above is the oldest "Chinese character" found so far. It is a symbol carved on a large pottery vessel from the Dawenkou culture, and it is more than 5,000 years old. Historians call it "taowen (pottery script)", but it is not systematic like oracle bone script(fig.1&2). It is thought that the symbol represents the sunrise, and is a proto-

type of the Chinese character 旦, because it looks like the sun rising from a mountain with a cloud in the middle. We can imagine that our ancestors truly came into contact with the essence of “art” by sensing the world in a very real way, internalizing their experiences, and then expressing them visually with their bodies and tools. How many times have we written calligraphy when we are connected to the world in such a sincere, bare-naked way? It is just as how Merleau-Ponty once described Cezanne’s art as fresh and lively, “giving people the impression that it originated from nature” and “he paints as if no one had ever painted before.”

But then again, who can be sure that this symbol really represents the sunrise? Or, it might not even be a character, but a bunch of drawings that delineate an image? Or, is it possible that it is not a word, but a series of words, a sentence, a paragraph, a work of literature? Rather, what we can be certain about is that since its medium is pottery, it is therefore ceramic art. Furthermore, it involves the firing of pottery, and thus it is also science. There are other scholars who say that the pottery was used by shamans to serve wine to the god of heaven, so it points to religion. On the other hand, if our ancestors became interested in weather, time, and the stars after they saw the sunrise, then it was the beginning of astronomy and meteorology. Therefore, there is not even a chance to consider the artistic medium here. The discussion has gone beyond categories such as calligraphy, painting, and pottery, and expanded into fields: art, science, literature, astronomy, and religion, all in one with no categories separating them. It is conceivable that if human beings can make ordinary writing indistinguishable from calligraphy, vessels indistinguishable from pottery, and even walking indistinguishable from dancing, making the practical and the impractical merge regardless of medium, then art will have truly fulfilled its mission and melted away, leading humanity back to the indistinguishable oneness of the world. This reminds me of the words of the modern calligrapher Lu Fusheng, “If writing becomes pure calligraphy, the fortune of enjoying calligraphy’s purifying effects in the Zen context or seeing one’s skill advance towards “Tao” will no longer be possible.”

If you think the above statement is a bit of a stretch, and that it is better to return to the “traditional” way of writing calligraphy, next time before you start writing, seriously let go of all your knowledge, memory, morality, and emotions, and try to connect with all living things in the world before you start to moisten your brush with ink and write. Perhaps the result can be as full of vitality “as if no one in the world had ever written before”, and return to “nature” as the ancients advocated. Other than that scroll of calligraphy, the truth is that the process of allowing oneself to feel connected to everything is as essential as the calligraphy that serves as the final visual vestige of that process. Fortunately, contemporary art provides sufficient technology and—more importantly—an open mind to record it all. As for the way to maintain that sensitivity to and empathy with everything around us, and then to internalize it into calligraphy, Qing the carpenter had his own way of fasting to quiet his mind; the people of the Jin Dynasty had their lifestyle of pursuing talent, nature, and rhythm; and we should also have our own way of doing things that is responsive to our time.

Notes

- 1 Contemporary art is inherently all-encompassing; its basic characteristic is the absence of a so-called unified artistic style. See (US) Danto, Arthur. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Trans. Lin Ya-Chi and Zheng Hui-Wen. Taipei: Rye Field Publishing, 2010, p.39.
- 2 As Danto said, “Ours is a moment, at least (and perhaps only) in art, of deep pluralism and total tolerance. Nothing is ruled out.” Danto, Arthur. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, p.10.
- 3 For example, *Pilot (Jammer)* (1975) by the American artist Robert Rauschenberg. Please refer to: <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/pilot-jammer>.
- 4 For example, *4'33"* (1952/1953) by American musical artist John Cage. Please refer to: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/163616>.
- 5 The most extreme example is Lawrence Weiner’s “sculptures”, which use only words to describe the concept.
- 6 Qiu Zhengzhong, a professor at the China Academy of Art and a calligrapher, also uses the above definition. Qiu, Zhengzhong. “Derived from Calligraphy: A Definition of a Type of Art and Others”, *Divine Habitat: From the History of Calligraphy to the Methodology of Calligraphy Research*. Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2006, p.106.
- 7 For example, the works of Franz Kline, an American abstract expressionist painter. Please refer to: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78319?sov_referrer=artist&artist_id=3148&page=1.
- 8 As to whether or not the tools used must be brushes, paper, and ink, I do not think it is necessary, since the ancients, such as Xu Zhang and Huaisu, did not write with only these tools. Although it is undeniable that the combination of brush, paper, and ink seems, by far, to be the tools that best reflect and convey the artist’s state of mind through the subtle variations that are expressed through the hand. For a more detailed discussion of “rhythm”, see the third part of the next section.
- 9 For example, the calligraphy of Aoyama San’u, Teshima Yūkei, Morita Shiryū, Inoue Yūichi, etc.
- 10 For example, Wang Dongling held an impromptu performance of writing *A Moonlit Night by the Spring River* in large-scale cursive calligraphy in the plaza of the Hong Kong Museum of Art in 2013. See: <https://lj.hkej.com/lj2017/artculture/article/id/53199>.
- 11 Please refer to: <https://collections.mplus.org.hk/tc/objects/a-one-thousand-time-copy-of-lantingxu-2012839>.
- 12 Please refer to: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/>.
- 13 For example, Chui Pui-Chee’s work of cursive calligraphy *Tourbillon* (2012). Please refer to: <https://www.iso.cuhk.edu.hk/chinese/publications/newsletter/article.aspx?articleid=54710>.
- 14 Please refer to: <https://www.artofhsiungpingming.org/document-info.php?lang=tw&Page2=86>.
- 15 Please refer to: https://news.artron.net/20130615/n463474_5.html.
- 16 Please refer to: https://news.artron.net/20130615/n463474_6.html.
- 17 G. W. F. Hegel. *Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Trans. T. M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, p.11.

- 18 Danto. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, pp.41-42.
- 19 Li Zehou. *Chinese Aesthetics*. Taipei: San Min Book, 1996, p.120.
- 20 Lao Sze-Kwang. *Essentials of Chinese Culture (New Edition)*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1998, p.38.
- 21 For example, Xu Fuguan wrote, "Phenomenology wishes to exclude all knowledge of the natural world begotten from a naturalistic approach. It does so either by putting it into brackets, or by suspending judgment. That which cannot be eliminated by exclusion is called the remnants of phenomenology. It is the inherent existence of consciousness itself, which is pure consciousness... The bracketing and the suspension of judgment in phenomenology is close to Zhuangzi's forgetting." Xu, Fuguan. *The Spirit of Chinese Art*. Taipei: Student Book, 2013, pp.75-80.
- 22 The philosopher Lee Tien-Ming stated, "The center of phenomenology's endeavor is to recapture a direct, primordial contact between man and the world, attempting to give us a direct account of our original experience, without giving it a psychological origin or a scientific, historical, or social explanation. In short, according to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, to "return to perception itself" allows perception to present itself as it is, without interpreting it with our concepts. That is the basis of the principle for preserving the primordial nature of perception. See Le Tien-Ming. *An Introduction to Existentialism*. Taipei: Student Book, 1993, p. 165. However, from a more rigorous academic perspective, the two schools of thought are not equivalent. The greatest difference is probably that phenomenology does not ask whether there is something unknowable behind the phenomena, but Taoism does suggest that there is an unknowable, indescribable, and immutable "Tao" behind the phenomena. Lee, Tien-Ming. *An Introduction to Existentialism*, p.256; and Xu Fuguan. *The Spirit of Chinese Art*, p.79.
- 23 For example, *Unicorn* and others in a series of artworks about the relationship between the body, tools (objects), and space by the famous German artist Rebecca Horn.
- 24 Please refer to: <http://www.js-lin.com/archives/portfolio/writing-calligraphy-with-exchanged-viewpoint>.
- 25 In fact, scientists and sociologists have already used virtual reality technology in experiments about racial discrimination to swap the vision of black and white participants so that each person sees his or her own skin color being "exchanged" for another.
- 26 Cheng Baoyi. *L'écriture poétique chinoise / Vide et plein: Le langage pictural chinois*. Trans. Tu, Weiqun. Taipei: ARTouch, 2011, pp.28-29.
- 27 The viewers are surrounded by three pillars in a pitch dark room, and on each pillar hangs a calligraphy inscription written in large regular script. The Chinese words "Six Dust", "Micro-objects", and "Controlling Silence" are written on each scroll, respectively. Behind every scroll, there is a strong flashing light installed behind it, which takes turns flashing every five seconds. The viewers see the calligraphy with very short and very strong flashes that leave only an afterimage of the characters in their eyes.

- 28 There has been ample theoretical research and discussion on the meaning of “rhythm” in both calligraphy and painting from ancient times to the present, so I will not go into detail here. Wang Keyu in the Ming period noted in *Mohuage Zazhi* that “Even though Jin calligraphy is not a renowned school, it has a kind of refined and subdued attitude to it... it triumphs through rhythm, with each falling stroke spreading elegantly across the paper, a naturally impressive style.” Hsiung Bing-Ming pointed out in *Theoretical Systems of Chinese Calligraphy* that “rhythm” is a manifestation of “human nature” (not personality), and therefore can be compatible with everything found in nature. Hsiung, Bing-Ming. *Theoretical Systems of Chinese Calligraphy*. Taipei: Lion Art, 2014, pp.140-142. “Human nature” is given by the metaphysical (the so-called “heavens”), and is therefore a priori, rather than a manifestation of an artificial character such as personality, style (i.e., the “intention” that the Song dynasty revered). Therefore, Jin calligraphy’s reverence for rhythm is indeed a philosophical, thought-provoking proposition.
- 29 From *Bisuilun* by Yu Shinan.
- 30 This aspect of Zhuangzi’s argument has been pointed out by scholars as belonging to mysticism. However, there have been recent advances in the scientific understanding of the human brain, and, for example, studies on psilocybin (mostly used in psychedelic drugs) have pointed out that psilocybin use can reduce activity in the human brain’s default mode network, and the results show that test subjects often feel their consciousness expanding beyond themselves and becoming one with everything around them, such as sensing the crawling of ants beside them. There is still so much of the human consciousness left to explore.
- 31 Li Zehou. *Chinese Aesthetics*, p.125.
- 32 Xu Fuguan. *The Spirit of Chinese Art*, p.152.
- 33 There are a number of contemporary artists who make artworks out of everyday actions. For example, Hong Kong artist Pak Sheung Chuen’s *Waiting for a Friend (without Appointment)* (2016) is an unplanned wait for a friend to appear in a subway station. His “Going Home Project” for the 2010 Taipei Biennial was to go home with the participants of the project and chat with them. One other example is another Hong Kong artist, Ching Chin Wai, whose “artwork” was to just go to work as an art museum administrator.
- 34 In fact, some artists already understand and present their calligraphy works from this perspective. For example, Swiss artist Lu Lis Jung’s work *Calligraphic Action 1-1 (Writing Buddha King of Great Emptiness)* is a video recording of the artist’s attitude and behavior when writing calligraphy on the mountain wall, with the aim of reconstructing the context in which writing was done in the past. Please refer to: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/84691009.pdf>.
- 35 As Li Zehou pointed out, the “naturalization of human beings” is not to revert to a bestial nature and passively adapt to the environment. Li, Zehou. *Chinese Aesthetics*, p.121. Or, as Xu Fuguan stated, the “discarding of one’s knowledge” proposed by Zhuangzi is no ordinary child’s play. It is

to be baptized by a system of learning first before forgetting everything; only then would the “discarding” be meaningful. See Xu Fuguan, *The Spirit of Chinese Art*, p.75.

36 Please refer to: <https://stories.mplus.org.hk/tc/channel/yangjiang-group-subverting-calligraphy/>.