

A silent dialogue



On 25 August 2016, people were invited to participate in Tianli Zu's performance at Vermilion Art Gallery. Participants engaged with Zu in a silent conversation, sitting on opposite ends of a long table. He or she communicated a thought by drawing a white continuous line on a piece of black paper. The drawing was passed on to the artist. Zu examined the message and responded with cut-outs to the paper. The completed dialogue was then returned to the participant.

Dr Tianli Zu, multimedia artist and the performer, spoke with psychotherapist Dr Richard Wu prior to the performance and invited him to observe the process. After the performance, they had a dialogue examining the hidden meanings within the performance, including some analysis of some of the drawings and cut-out works.

Wu:

So, Tian, what helped you to conceive the idea of this interactive performance art?

ZU:

In my view, performance art is the art of performance without acting. To reveal myself requires courage, sincerity and clarity.

I wanted to emphasise non-verbal and non-written communication. To me, it represents a broader notion: after all, visual art is a medium that connects people beyond the boundaries of language. In a world where *yin* and *yang* is disrupted, people misunderstand, misinterpret and misjudge each other by what is said. This performance communicates with people intimately, face to face, by connecting their unconsciousness. In my view, this is the gateway to understanding.

Wu:

Indeed, this is like your inner world responding immediately to the participant's inner world without the usual interference of language and formalities. What do you think may still influence this dialogue, for instance the setting, presence of other participants, or what other participants had already drawn before?

ZU:

Those are certainly influencing factors.

In terms of setting, I wanted to make it as neutral and minimal as possible. In this way, the audience has little restriction on the free expansion of their imagination.

As for how the participants would behave and interact, it was, of course, completely out of my control. That I had no idea what would come for me, however, was not necessarily a negative. I had mixed emotions of excitement and nervousness.

Ultimately, I hoped that the dialogue would open people's minds and enable them to make a difference to the broader community by meeting their own inner world. I believe that by knowing oneself enables one to know how to act and react to the world accordingly. In Taoist terms 'Practice not-doing, and everything will fall into place',¹ or in other words, 'do without wilful force'. If everyone acts sincerely, the world will become more harmonised.

We may never be sure of art's functionality within society. But I feel that this spontaneous engagement between the artist and the audience can shift the position a little, as German performance artist Joseph Beuys said: 'Everyone is an artist'.

To answer your question directly, the presence of other participants was not, I think, distracting. Rather, it is reflection of our world, marked by influence, interaction and interrelationships.

What was your first impression when you came into the performance? Did you come with any expectations?

1 Lao-tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006). Chapters 3.

WU:

I guess I had some preconceived ideas because we had a practice run before and discussed the process.

However, when I arrived, I was struck by the solemn, almost reverend atmosphere, with yourself gowned in a black period ball dress, sitting in front of your magnificent 2 story high papercut artwork, and candles lit on the side. I suppose, in a way, this immediately removed the audience from the usual mundaneness. What made you choose this setting, which by the way, I must say had quite a dramatic impact.

Perhaps some participants might have been also intimidated by the presence of others, some of whom were esteemed artists..

ZU:

I will admit that the seemingly holy or religious atmosphere was not my intension. My intension was to convey a vital energy, if I may put it this way. What I hoped was to create an energy flow between the work and everyone in the room, and vice versa.



Figure 1

Interestingly, one of the participants demonstrated such energy through his drawing (Figure 1). He solemnly drew circular lines which, at the end, exited off the top of the page.

Wu:

Yes this was an important aspect of the experience. The audience's energy resonated and created this sense of togetherness, even though we were at the same time, silently held in our own aloneness. This connectedness between our inner and outer was perhaps what forged the spiritual atmosphere in addition to the candles and the dramatic artwork in the background.

There could be many ways to interpret this particular drawing, For instance, the participant drew the concentric circles but did not wish it to end within the loops, which may carry a sense of entrapment within the mundaneness of life. His lifting at the end may be a yearning for something beyond, something spiritual. This is but only one possibility and we do project something of ourselves when we attempt to interpret. The drawer himself of course could have something totally different in mind. In a way, this I suppose is the beauty of this experience – a simple line drawing allowing room for both the drawer, and you the responder, to meander and bring forth something from within the inner world.

To the participants, perhaps what is more important is not our interpretation, but your response, which may afterwards evoke further elaborations in their mind.

What did you respond with?

ZU:

When I viewed the drawing, it seemed to me that the participant was in the center of a perfectly managed domain. However, according to the laws of nature, one polarity cannot exist without its opposition. I saw through the seemingly uprising energy and recognised a concealed disturbance. In response, I folded the paper in half and cut a line perpendicular to the participant's drawn line. I then cut a reflecting line at the opposite end of the page. The absent lines made the work (Figure 2) stronger, I believe, and so the conversation was complete.



Figure 2

As an aside, the candles were not part of the performance, but the gallery's arrangement. Although I was surprised by them, I decided to let it go and see how public would respond to it. At least it created some warmth on a cold winter night.

I am interested in something you mentioned earlier in relation to feeling intimidated. What do you think caused this sensation of intimidation or uncomfortableness?

WU:

The candles I thought added dramatic, or religious associations, which became part of the whole synergy that created the sense of spirituality, the aloneness-togetherness. I see them as a positive element that enhanced people's reach for something deeper.

Participants may often feel reserved about free expression in a public place, and wonder if they would be judged by how good or bad their drawing look, or their emotions or secrets being 'discovered'. You mentioned courage before, and it would require courage on the part of the participant as well.

In my experience as a psychotherapist, the therapy setting, the therapist's body language, what's displayed in the office all matter to the patient's development of ease. Often it may take some time for the patient to allow their authentic inner world to emerge. So the setting, the presence of others I think also matter greatly here. The setting you created was dramatic and I thought had a reverend atmosphere, so I wondered what effect you wanted to impart on the participants by your design of the setting.

ZU:

Space and setting are of course crucial to any performance. I hoped that sitting on opposite ends of a long table would give people space. We are strangers to each other until we engage in an intimate, silent and private conversation (albeit in a public space). I hoped that some distance would allow people to imagine without compulsion.

Further, I was intrigued to see people (although silently) makes connections and relate to others in the room. The seeming stillness become lively and the limited space expanded.

This work (Figure 3) reacted to the atmosphere very differently. When I saw this drawing, I couldn't help but laugh silently. I think I may have giggled. The simple outline of Pac Man!

WU:

With regards to the second drawing (Figure 3); well, simpler the drawing, more the possibilities it embodies. This could also be a cake with a slice taken out. As for Pac Man, my experience in psychotherapy is that, when people feel compelled to come up with something abstract or ambiguous, they firstly search in their past for symbols or images that they had seen, and yes, often commercial or iconic. If indeed the participant indicated that he or she was drawing the Pac Man, it may be interesting to explore what was happening in life at the time when they first encountered the Pac Man and what had emerged since. This of course was outside the scope of this interaction, and more for the participant to reflect on afterwards.

ZU: I perceived it literally as Pac Man! So I cut a set of sharp teeth, with a couple missing (Figure 4). Life cannot be lived too seriously!

I found it fascinating how one participant affected another's expression. Emotion is contagious. To me, this drawing (Figure 5) is a celebration of life – the participant enjoys the glory of being. Inspired by Lao-Tzu, I cut a big sun behind the boy with his penis erect:

He who is in harmony with the Tao
is like a newborn child.

...

It doesn't know about the union
of male and female,
yet its penis can stand erect,
so intense is its vital power.²

Wu:

This indeed is a sunny, celebrating figure and you enhanced and spiced it up. By the way, I noticed how immediate you were with your cutting, often forming complex shapes quite quickly.

Is this something you often did in your childhood?

ZU:

As a matter of fact, I was a very stubborn child and was not flexible at all. I could never obey orders and more often than not, went in the opposite direction for no good reason. My awareness of the benefits of



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

flexibility and listening to silence arrived when I had my first child. I explored the power of *yin*, such that softness may overcome hardness, and learnt to go with the flow instead of applying wilful force.

WU:

In this profile drawing of a face (Figure 6), you cut out the shape of an ear, and I think you said you felt the ear was closer to the heart. This is interesting, as the Chinese word Yi, 意 (which I translate as Mind) is written as the 'sound of the heart', and the Chinese concept of companion-in-empathy, *Zhi Yin*, 知音, also literally means 'he who gets my tune'. It is an interesting choice, as many would have worked on the eye, as we live so much by visual cues these days. This focus on hearing is perhaps also to do with an important theme of the exercise, silence; you really need to listen to appreciate silence. Maybe you can elaborate on this.

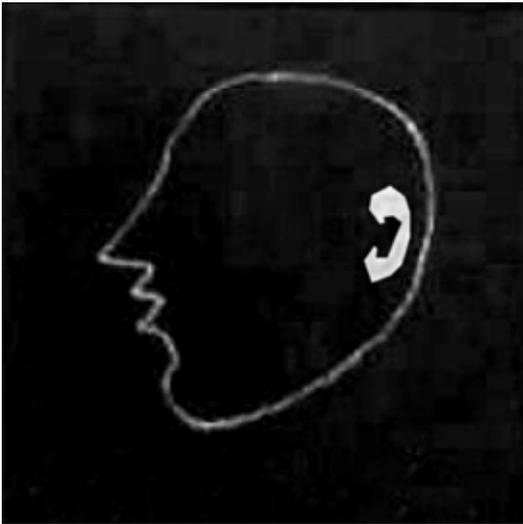


Figure 6

ZU:

I must confess, my first impression was to respond with an eye. But there is a Chinese sensibility that a subtle and indirect approach is a gesture of humbleness, understanding and respect. Further, as I said before, life cannot be lived too seriously. Life is a game. In order to play the game well, as an artist, I always try to project something unpredictable.

WU:

I have just realised what you meant by the *yin* and *yang*. Drawing is adding; cutting is dealing with negative space and subtracting. This following collaboration is a good illustration of the *yin* and *yang*.



Figure 7

ZU:

Yes, exactly! The works evidence positive and negative space.

In respect of this work (Figure 7), to me, the continuous line projects a sense of volume. It represents the burden that everyone has in our daily lives. It seems that the drawer is accustomed to such routine. I simply cut out four shapes to take the drawing outside of the contour, perhaps as a way to relieve tension.

WU:

Tell me why you didn't cut this work (Figure 8) ...



Figure 8

ZU:

Upon first examination, I noticed that the participant had left half of the page blank. An invitation for me to cut, perhaps. However, on closer examination, I noticed that the figure had his back turned against the center. Alternatively, I saw a tall, enclosed fortress. It was at that moment that I decided not to cut the work. I perceived cutting as a forceful action, interfering when interference was unwanted, which may bring misfortune and bring about a faster decline.

What could have been cut out will remain a mystery.

As our dialogue comes to a close, I suspect that the participants may never pay any attention to what we have discussed. However, it is my hope that the performance itself plants a seed – in time, it will make the participants aware of his or her self. At the very least, I would hope that it is a gentle tap on the shoulder or a whisper in the ear that reminds him or her of his or her own existence, as an individual and well as part of a collective.

WU:

What I think was most valuable was your noninterfering invitation to the participants to draw. By being silent, there were no expectations imposed on the subject matter. This was indeed consistent with the Taoist principle of 'non-doing, or *wuwei*', thus giving the participant freedom to reach within themselves. Incidentally, psychoanalysis also began with Freud's notion of free association, which he described as 'letting whatever appeared in the patient's stream of consciousness do so without interference'.

By responding, or interpreting, the responder's own projections and associations inevitably intrude. The finished artwork thus contains elements from both the participant's inner world and yours. To me, the silent resonance between the two inner worlds in this reverend setting, was what imparted the sense of 'being at one'. This is a form of secular spirituality central to Eastern philosophies, and now also becoming increasingly present in the contemporary world.

Some works from the performance



Australian multimedia artist, Dr Tianli Zu, was born in Beijing, China, and now lives in Sydney. Zu specialises in the texts of Taoism as a means of understanding and participating in this disruptive yin-yang world. She uses an interdisciplinary process to engage with complex social phenomena culturally, philosophically and psychologically. Zu works with people to attain understanding, perseverance and harmony in the context of contemporary art.
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Dr Richard Wu FRANZCP, MBBS, is a psychiatrist and psychotherapist practising in Sydney. He is a member of the Faculty of Psychotherapy, Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, and co-chaired Section of Psychotherapy and Culture at International Federation of Psychotherapy Congress, 2014. He has published internationally and presented at World Congress of Psychotherapy, International Federation of Psychotherapy, Art Gallery of New South Wales, National Art School (Sydney), Central Academy of Fine Art (Beijing) on creativity, art and psychotherapy. His paintings were shown in group exhibitions at Art Gallery of New South Wales, Art Asia Expo and other venues. He also illustrated 'Falling and Flying', an anthology of Australian poems on ageing.