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Re-appropriating the concept of ‘play-appreciation’, and Dao’s cyclical sense of time and space through Chinese typography in digital media format

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Abstract: In this paper, I investigate how the idea of the “Yellow Box” can together provide a novel approach to the concepts of time and space for typography design history and development in China. I then argued that the concept of ‘play-appreciation’ is one of the elements of the ‘Yellow Box’. The idea of using long scroll as a form of visual representation, as well as the idea of using Chinese chairs, applies and enacts the viewers’ experience of ‘play-appreciation’.

Key words: *Interactive, Yellow Box, Digital Moving Typography, Dao theory*

1. Introduction

Through my seminal interviews with designers and curators in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, about the concept of the Yellow Box, it became apparent that they have not really encompassed or appreciated either new media art & design practices or the interactive relationships of these platforms with their audiences. This thesis therefore sets out to further analyse the subjects of time and space within my own media-art & design production process (custom software and hardware). It is hoped that other researchers and designers may benefit from my own attempts to illustrate Chinese art / aesthetic theories and to document and reflect upon different ways of perceiving the position and role of the audience, and that they may thus gain a unique insight into the incorporation of Chinese philosophy into digital typography design practice.

2. Yellow Box

In 2005, Chinese scholar, Johnson Chang and his colleagues coined the term ‘Yellow Box’ to describe the fact that the forms and processes of Chinese art did not easily fit into the Western concepts of art history or its exhibition spaces. They proposed an alternative: the Yellow Box. They thought that this concept could best accommodate contemporary Chinese art and its audience. In this thesis I not only propose that audiences should be encouraged to enter this exhibition space without time constraints, but suggest that interactive digital design could offer a new triangular level of interactive intimacy between the typography design work, the viewer and the designer. Why have both Eastern and Western digital media design been largely neglected in this Yellow Box context? A number of different factors might be responsible for this omission. Certainly, the discipline of digital moving images has many show-time constraints, and the sheer amount of computer technology involved in digital media media can often create a cold reaction between the designer, the design work, and the viewer.

“Dao” project and workshop

My digital media series “Dao” design project and workshop will serve here as a case study and practical experimentation project furthering the analysis of how the traditional Chinese concept of time and space can be applied through Chinese typography with digital moving images in a long scroll format. I have continued to pursue my research on some of the questions raised in this thesis through organising a series of workshops entitled ‘Flip and Fly’, a digital animation workshop of Chinese character-writing, which aims to offer an opportunity for audiences/participants to take part in creating and exploring their own extra-animated characters with the designer. This will become part of the installation “Dao” exhibition. I am in the process of designing and implementing creative workshops of this kind to explore and reinterpret the concept of wan shang (玩賞, ‘play-appreciation’), shifting the role of the audience from passivity to active participation and creativity.

‘Play-appreciation’

First of all, traditional Chinese chair is one of the major elements to implement the concept of ‘play-appreciation’. The function of these forty chairs helps to bridge the connection between the virtual space (on the screen) and physical space (in the exhibition venue) for the viewers. The spatial arrangement of Chinese chairs correlates to the empty

space left in Chinese characters. Chinese characters and Chinese traditional style chairs seem to be incompatible elements, in which Chinese characters are regarded as 2-dimensional virtual images while the chairs are 3D solid objects. However, the concepts of 'solid' and 'virtual' are not necessarily contradictory. This is because both Chinese characters and traditional Chinese chairs are presented as unified and completed 'objects' with concrete sculptural structures and systems; and their visual form is considered as the matching point between empty space (negative space - yin) and solid structure (positive space -yang), depending on the direction of one's perceptions. The empty space left by the chair and the characters in both cases comes from their solid structure. In other words, when we perceive the chairs and 'animated flying Chinese characters' in the exhibition space, both yin and yang spatial experience is involved. In contrast to the 'animated flying Chinese characters', the form of the chairs exists in a real space, and the Chinese characters are realized and visualized in virtual space.



Figure.1 (Image sequences) Providing a sense of flexibility and freedom to the audience. Venue: the Hong Kong Museum of Art; Hong Kong, 2010 (visualization by the author).

Moreover, these traditional Chinese chairs help to extend the feeling of intimacy and interaction between viewers, artwork and artist. The chairs allow viewers to feel free to come and drop by the exhibition space without any time restriction. Viewers are welcome to sit anywhere depending on which video sequence they are viewing. Also, some kids always rearrange the chairs depending on their preferences. So I have had to come back to the exhibition venue to rearrange the chairs once a week, in order to ensure that the visual arrangement or flow of the chairs correlates to the flow of the Chinese characters on the screens. This fact alone indicates that viewers feel more comfortable and willing to spend time with this kind of interactive installation setting.

Finally, through physically touching the old Chinese chairs viewers can feel closer to the exhibition space. And the longer they sit on the chairs, the closer the empathy they feel with the material object. The materiality and function of the chairs reflects the relation between the human being and a natural object, corresponding to Zhuang zi's concept of Dao "Heaven, Earth and I were created together; All things and I are unified as One". Viewers can merge into spiritual and material space through this embraced environment I then argued that the concept of 'play-appreciation' is one of the elements of the 'Yellow Box'. The idea of using long scroll as a form of visual representation, as well as the idea of using Chinese chairs, applies and enacts the viewers' experience of 'play-appreciation'.

Exploring the idea of 'play appreciation' in digital media

In fact, the emphasis on the interrelation between artwork, artist and audience (the presence of the artist / the artist's responsibility for the context of the artwork / the role of the audience in completing the artwork) is not only found in traditional Chinese art practice, a similar idea (which I shall call 'triangular relationship' in this thesis) in performance and media arts has also been established in the West at least since the 1960s. Audience participation has also been an important element in other digital media art—apart from Fluxus—since the early 1980s. Academic critics have also emphasized the importance of audience participation, and there has been wide discussion of this issue. Michael Rush, for example, states that beyond the 'clicking' and 'surfing' activities of the Web, which are, indeed, forms of interaction with computer technology, several artists towards the end of the century created works, often on a larger scale, that are truly participatory (Rush 2001, p. 201). Michael Rush also comments that interactivity is a new form of visual experience that extends beyond the visual to the tactile. Viewers are essential and active participants in this art. No longer mere viewers, they are now users (Rush 2001, p.216).

Thus, my Dao Gives Birth to One workshop corresponds to his concept as described in the following paragraphs. My workshop may be simple in terms of its structure, it, however, requires interaction between the audience and the artist. Participants are required to attend a lecture and use the Chinese brush to create animated characters. They need to wait for over a week and then return to the venue to combine their output with the artwork of the artist.

The term 'participant', in the context of contemporary art, refers to a relationship between a spectator and an already existing open-ended art work (Popper 1997, p.8). My workshop, for example, would be incomplete without active participation of the audience and the definition of a 'complete' work is open-ended. Dao Gives Birth to One has been run in Manchester and Hong Kong, and while the infrastructure is the same, the outcome was totally different. One may see my workshop + exhibition as two individual art pieces, or one single art work with open-ended interpretations.

In this sense, my latest interactive version of Dao Gives Birth to One (version IV) could be taken as an example of appropriating the idea of 'play-appreciation' through shifting the role of the audience in the disparate spaces of exhibition, lecture and workshop. In my Dao project, there is an opportunity for audiences to transform their own culture and story through the process of making their own hands-on animated letters (English/Chinese characters). A tangible touch is created through an appeal to their own experience, which allows audiences to express their own meanings and then encourages them to play (interacted) with these together with other members of the audience later in the exhibition. This exhibition space is no longer a white cube, black box or yellow box; it works through participation, immersion, creativity, and gathering hands-on experience. I claim that this could be considered a new translation for 'play-appreciation' in the future.

Conclusion

Through recontextualizing the function and the materiality of those old Chinese chairs to the exhibition space, the Dao project suggests a sense of intimacy between human beings, Chinese characters and the universe. The role of the viewer has shifted from observation (passive role) to participation (active role) or has even assumed part of the artist's role,

from where it has become truly interactive. My research has, therefore, demonstrated how the traditional Chinese idea of time and space can be applied and recontextualized, and has shown a broad spectrum of connections between Chinese art and digital media. The results may open a new way of perceiving notions of time and space through shifting the role of the viewer from passivity to activity, and from there to interactivity.

In the result, with this exploration I hope to encourage other researchers and designers to transform philosophies of time and space in Chinese scroll format and calligraphy into new media design practice. My design project examines the possibility and limitations of combining Chinese shu 'brush writing' (calligraphy) and hua 'painting' in 2D and 4D practice today. My design project "Dao" suggests how the 'Yellow Box' concept of 'play-appreciation', and the Dao's cyclical sense of time and space, can be realized through digital technology, by shifting the role of the viewers from passivity to activity.

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