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Mapping the world: Hong Kong's Spring Workshop hosts Qiu Zhijie

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Interactive art and a process based practice make Qiu Zhijie the perfect partner for Hong Kong art space Spring Workshop.

Between May and August 2013 China's Qiu Zhijie, fresh from curating the Shanghai Biennale 2012, brought his innovative approach to mapping to Spring Workshop in Hong Kong. Spring Founder and Director Mimi Brown explains why Qiu Zhijie is the nonprofit's perfect partner.



Qiu Zhijie, "The Universe of Naming", installation view at Spring Workshop, Hong Kong.

In Summer 2013, Hong Kong's nonprofit art space **Spring Workshop** invited Chinese artist **Qiu Zhijie** to explore the concept of the map. Interpreting mapping as a tool to understanding the world, in his exhibition "**The Universe of Naming**" Qiu Zhijie uses the entire floor of Spring Workshop to draw a map of "disputed areas".

From 23 May to 18 August, visitors are able to intervene on Qiu Zhijie's map by rolling around globes made from wood, steel and glass, engraved with words representing human nature and emotion, natural disasters, politics and ideologies. The maps that fill the exhibition walls were created in collaboration with fifty university art students from Hong Kong. Formed with ink and found objects categorised through different methods, these collaborative maps are intended to invent new ways of understanding the world.



Qiu Zhijie, "The Universe of Naming", installation view of students/artist collaborative project at Spring Workshop, Hong Kong.

Spring Workshop, one of Hong Kong's few non-commercial art spaces, is committed to an international cross-disciplinary programme of artist and curatorial residencies, exhibitions, music, film and talks. **Mimi Brown**, the founder of the space, explains to *Art Radar* why she wanted to work with Qiu Zhijie and her vision for an art organisation that embraces the process as much as the final work.



Mimi Brown, Founder and Director of Spring Workshop, Hong Kong.

“The Universe of Naming” is a continuation of “Blueprints”, an exhibition that Qiu Zhijie presented at Witte de With in 2012. Why did Spring invite Qiu Zhijie to work further on this project in Hong Kong?

There are definitely a few reasons why Qiu Zhijie was invited to do this project. First of all, Spring is interested in education and Qiu Zhijie is known to be an iconic teacher as well as an iconic artist. He’s known for rethinking pedagogy in the way art is taught: this relates to the concept of “total art” that he’s been using at the **China Academy of Art** where he came up with a more holistic methodology. So by inviting him to Spring we were able to invite fifty Hong Kong art students from universities to work along the artist on the installation during two days. To share his passion about teaching with Hong Kong students and artists was one very important reason to invite Qiu Zhijie.



Qiu Zhijie, “The Universe of Naming”, installation view at Spring Workshop, Hong Kong.

Another reason why Qiu Zhijie was invited to Spring is that he was willing to share his process as an artist. As an artist residence Spring is very much interested in processes, not only the final exhibition. We actually had an artist talk and an exhibition when the exhibition was only halfway done. This is quite special because when you go to an exhibition you often get to see only the final work and not what happened along the way. We had an event on 11 May 2013 where Qiu Zhijie shared his process with the public.

Finally, Qiu Zhijie came here because we happened to be working in a partnership with Witte de With. We very much value our partnerships with other nonprofits both in Hong Kong and internationally. Actually, in this case the maps had a very interesting trajectory from Rotterdam to the **Shanghai Biennial 2012**, where Qiu Zhijie was the curator, and then to Spring. Each time they are shown the maps are quite different. For example, this is the first time that they became vinyl on the floor with spheres rolling with words engraved on them. The artist has been working on this idea for so long and each iteration is a completely new work of art.

As the spheres continue on to other countries, the artist will engrave them with other languages and by the end there will be so many languages on each sphere that it becomes universal. You are meant to touch them and roll them. For example if you grab this wooden one, it says “driver”. The bigger ones in steel [represent] more political moments versus the wooden ones, which are people.

How did the project fit in the 9th Shanghai Biennale?

In the former iteration of this map project there were no balls, this is the first time [Qiu Zhijie] has introduced the spheres. These balls were all made in Beijing for this exhibition specifically. In Shanghai he had the maps on display throughout the Biennale and he used those maps to trace threads throughout the rest of the show in place of a curatorial structure.



The artist included a workshop with local students in this exhibition. Can the workshop be seen as a part of Qiu Zhijie’s work?

As he is such a comprehensive artist and teacher and both of those things are so intertwined, my sense is that they are considered part of the work. I think he is a man of enormous generosity of spirit and he worked very closely with those students. They had fascinating conversations for hours at a time about the meaning of these different objects and how to arrange them and place them, so I would think he would call it a part of the greater work. The last night before the exhibition he was working all night and when we came in the next morning he was adding things to the student walls as well, so that makes me think it is a part of the work.



So the artist intervened in the work of the students?

Yes, he added to it. During his artist talk, it was a great moment when he said: “All of us have a map in our heads of everything. For example Hong Kong: if all of us were to commit to paper our personal maps of Hong Kong would all look as different as snowflakes”. I think these students’ maps on the wall are another way of us seeing how someone else maps [the world]. There is Qiu Zhijie’s map and then there are these other maps, there are multiple maps with different angles.

Is the work to be considered finished as presented now in the exhibition?

The artist’s work is done and then your work begins when you come to the studio and look at the maps, you move the balls, you consider, you perceive and you participate. The artist is very interested in you participating, making your own map and changing things, creating new relationships.

Do you consider the process more important than the final work in this case?

Perhaps they are on equal footing. I would never want to put more emphasis on the process than on the final work, but I do think that in this case both are very important.

As Spring focuses a lot on the process, how do you position Spring Workshop in comparison to other venues in Hong Kong, which are often more focused on the commercial side of art?

I think that the entire art ecology in Hong Kong is important and every player has its own role. What Spring aims to do within that ecology is to provide extra space and support for nonprofit organisations or artists to expand, both in Hong Kong and internationally.



Qiu Zhijie, “The Universe of Naming”, installation view at Spring Workshop, Hong Kong.

Do you think you have a very different public compared to other venues in Hong Kong?

Actually we have the most amazing group of people who come to events. I think some of them are absolute art lovers who would go to [commercial] galleries, and then we have students who might never have gone to those other places. We have all different ages and quite an interesting cross section.

One of our goals is to provide an art experience. You don’t necessarily know what you are going to find here because we are cross-disciplinary and we want to make you comfortable and create a comfortable art experience. I think people come to have an experience instead of being targeted on exactly what we do.

Do you feel there is a lot of interest in the project precisely because it is so different from others in town?

Very much. I think the evidence is in the audience who come to each event: it gets bigger and bigger, because people know that something is going to happen when they show up. They will meet other people to talk with and they will probably get fed and have a drink!

Leslie Van Eyck

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