



Shi Zheng, Tang Xiaodan: *Calligraphy Masks*

Ars Electronica Futurelab, China Academy of Art

Futurelab.Academy

Ars Electronica Futurelab.Academy was created to support students from international partner universities to realize innovative projects in the field of media art. The format's unique features contain the Ars Electronica Futurelab's expertise and the possibility to participate in the world's most renowned festival for art, technology and society—the Ars Electronica Festival. Selected team members from the Ars Electronica Futurelab conduct workshops and seminars, which are open for a group of students. The topics of these lectures will be determined jointly beforehand, with the partner institutions being able to select from a variety of workshop topics. During the lectures, the students develop artistic concepts together with the lecturer from the Ars Electronica Futurelab, which are to be realized in the course of the semester. Most questions regarding content and technology should already be answered during this time. However, also during the realization process, the Ars Electronica Futurelab provides its expertise via phone

conferences and Q&A sessions. Finally, the students' artworks are assessed by the university professor together with the Ars Electronica Futurelab, with the aim of presenting the best works in a special exhibition at the Ars Electronica Festival. Therefore, the students have the opportunity to go through the whole process of artistic creation—from finding an idea to producing the exhibition together with an internationally experienced team.

Futurelab.Academy's first workshop series took place at the China Academy of Art, the first art school in China, as well as the leading institution in the research and education of new media art in the country. Its former New Media Art Department had nurtured a new generation of new media artists in China. The School of Intermedia Art at the Academy, newly founded in 2010, combines the former New Media Art Department with other units, including the graduate program in Contemporary Art and Social Thought, thus establishing a full-scale media arts program that covers different directions in the field, with each of its five Labs having its own area of emphasis. The Ars Electronica Futurelab workshop series at the China Academy of Art was initiated by Dajun Yao, sound artist, art historian, and Director of Open Media Lab at the Academy. Both institutions jointly developed a thematic direction for the workshop series that focuses on the interface between traditional culture and media technology. Roland Haring, Co-Director of Research and Innovation at Futurelab led the first workshop. Haring gave a thorough explanation of media art production principles and intermediate programming skills for interactive art. The workshop also invited a guest speaker, Lu Dadong, a young calligrapher and famous rock group leader, to give a demonstration and talk on the basics of Chinese calligraphy, which provided much background information as well as inspiration. Although being the place of origin of Chinese calligraphy, with neighboring countries such as Japan and Korea extending its area and application, China now faces a serious crisis with the 3,000 year old writing system and the art of writing. First of all, traditional cultural elements, of which calligraphy is but a small part, are conspicuously absent in everyday life in China; and this break with past is particularly severe for the young generation. Only a small elite circle of mostly older people now practises Calligraphy in China. Even more detrimental is the prevalence of writing by keyboard inputting on computers and cell phones, which has virtually all but replaced handwriting in reality. And the continuation of the Chinese character production mechanism, which relies on not only visual recognition and memory, but more on physical, motor memory of writing out each stroke of a character in sequence by hand, is facing a serious crisis—without the latter, the former will become increasingly difficult. Further complications are caused by the fact that Chinese calligraphy is done in the traditional, non-simplified script form, which most Chinese people in the Mainland today cannot fully comprehend. It is within this context of the alienation and disconnection of the young Chinese with their own past that this workshop proves to be all the more interesting and important. In this workshop, the students are given an opportunity to research on and re-think about a topic that usually falls outside their targets of new media artistic concerns—Chinese calligraphy and the writing system in general. They have to confront their own cultural heritage, as well as looking for its possibilities of extension with the help of technology and the various new media. It also stimulates the young artists to ponder on the question whether they need their own identity in the present globalization of new media art.

Therefore, the workshop has initiated several art projects that are now works-in-progress. At least some of them will be shown at the Ars Electronica Festival 2012. For instance, Xiong Zhenkai's *Cubelligraphy* proposes a 4-meter cube made up with dozens of layers of thin gauze, forming a space that the audience can walk in and out of freely. Audio-visual work showing animated calligraphy is projected from the two sides of the cube, thus forming a quasi-solid space of immersive environment of digital calligraphy filled with light and shadows and sound.

Inspired by the ancient Chinese "concrete poem" piece *Poem in a Plate*, Shi Zheng and Tang Xiaodan's *Concrete Poetry* is a video projected onto a series of raised 3-dimensional models on a wall. The video content are a series of concrete poems using Chinese characters related to all types of emotions in animation, and is accompanied by the sound of human voice expressing the corresponding emotions, such as anger, sadness, hatred, love, etc. Video is also central to Wang Zhipeng's *Eternity*, where a single Chinese character (yong, meaning "eternity") in calligraphy form is turned into a fractal image animation in which there is no beginning and no end. Everything is in a state of constant flux and scale is symbolically relative. The work is shown with three separate vertically projected videos on the wall. The fractals are audio-visual in format, i.e., animations with soundtrack composed with the Chinese pronunciation of the word "eternity" and environmental sounds.

With *Calliscope*, Luo Hang, Yan Weidan and Qiu Linru are developing a periscope or helmet, with video screen installed inside, which is worn by the viewer, who uses a glove controller or pointing device to view a 3D, virtual reality-type, representation of the earliest forms of Chinese characters related to agriculture. The control interface is designed in the form of a Rubik's Cube, in which different Chinese character animations reside, and the viewer can choose to zoom in/go into each cubic cell to experience the 3D pictographic rendering of the ancient pictographs. Another 3D-visualization is proposed by Shen Bijun, Pan Ying and Ma Bin's project *Hexagram Field*. Here, a chart of Chinese divination hexagrams is projected from the top to the floor. The visitor's position on this chart interacts with the projection of 3D graphics on the wall, which are particle animations of the different Chinese characters in various writing styles, showing how each pictograph evolved in history, but still understandable across cultural differences.

Inspired by the Tibetan prayer wheel, Tan Lijie and Qu Qianwen's work *Living Outside of Time* is made up of small wooden wheels inscribed with calligraphy, which in turn form a large, suspended prayer wheel. The visitor can easily turn the small wheels from outside or inside the large wheel structure, which triggers multi-channel sound resulting in a religious atmosphere, and at the same time the double-layered central pillar emits lights via the calligraphic carvings from the center of the wheel.

With some of the resulting works presented in the Festival within such a short period of time, we look forward to more Futurelab workshops that tackle other aspects of art, culture, and technology at China Academy of Art and other international partner universities in the future.

Text: Dajuin Yao, Horst Hörtner, Roland Haring, Roland Reiter