Liquid Space

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In this essay, I set off to write a history about a space that on principle is almost pointless to try to historicize, for it is a strange kind of space that has absorbed time. New is laminated against old: spare lines of modular steel float over creaking wood; screens – laser-cut paper, digital – are mounted on white plaster walls and cedar doors; a flurry of plexiglass wings curve under, and reflect, the hand-crafted ceramic tiles on the eaves above; a scrim of blackened mesh hangs around an age-old altar, encouraging visitors to kneel on the tatami mats in order to blindly glimpse the sacred objects behind. But that is a more literal absorption of the present into the past, or the other way around. The landscape where Zheng Chongbin's installation *Liquid Space* is located -- in the Ryōsokuin sub-temple of the Kenninji temple-- is itself slow, post-historical. The still rock gardens merge and serenely re-emerge through the installation into interior spaces – the temple *and* the mind. The space quietly demands that visitors give themselves up to the present moment and encourages a gentle decentering.

Yet Zheng Chongbin has charged me as an art historian with this task: to write a history of it. And there are, indeed, ways to write about the installation that are art historically conventional, familiar lines of scholarly inquiry that could treat the space with a certain circumspect formality as a constellation of visual objects with their own contexts and genealogies. In what follows, I test out those narratives, and try to gain an understanding of how art history writing submerges the strangeness of the *Liquid Space* installation or brings that strangeness to surface. In preparing for this project I have interviewed the artist extensively and I have, of course, visited Kenninji. My jotted notes on my own experience of *Liquid Space* are interleaved throughout.

I might begin this essay, for instance, with observations about context. The Kenninji temple complex was founded by the priest Yōsai (1141-1215) in 1202. The Ryōsokuin is in the monk's quarters and served as a private space for them to practice meditation. Like many temple structures, it is built modularly on stilt-like wooden pillars with brackets supporting a heavy tile roof. Joints in the wood permit it to move; there are no nails holding it rigidly in place. If the building is alive, so too are the carefully swept, dry rock gardens around it. Black and white gravel transposes into green stones lush with mosses and crawling insects, and low-lying plants. A pond and small groves of maples and pines neatly punctuate the rolling grounds. The gardens can be subject to the practitioners' meditative gaze from a low verandah encircling the temple, and from a seated position on tatami mats inside, through opened sliding doors. A recessed tokonoma in which a hanging scroll typically is displayed and an altar on which tablets inscribed with Buddhist genealogies are placed provide other foci for meditation.

> The cold spring rain had slowed down the cherry trees. Though a good week after the short time that their blossoms usually blanket the city of Kyoto, the flowers were only just starting to lose their bloom, to drift through the air and be swept into piles on the sidewalks. They stuck to my umbrella and clogs as I walked through the Gion entertainment district towards Kenninji, Kyoto's oldest Zen temple and the site of Zheng Chongbin's *Liquid Space* light and space installation.
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> I, too, was running late. And as I passed through the walls surrounding the temple complex, I was vaguely annoyed that I had not figured in time for my inevitable disorientation to the warren of sub-temples and for weaving back and forth around the crowds of tourists. What seemed to me to be the eastern quarters of the temple grounds, where the Ryōsokuin sub-temple was located, was the north, and I was about to arrive even later than I had thought.
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> Time, then, was present on my mind as I pulled off my clogs and walked barefoot across the worn cedar planks of the Ryōsokuin floor into the installation.

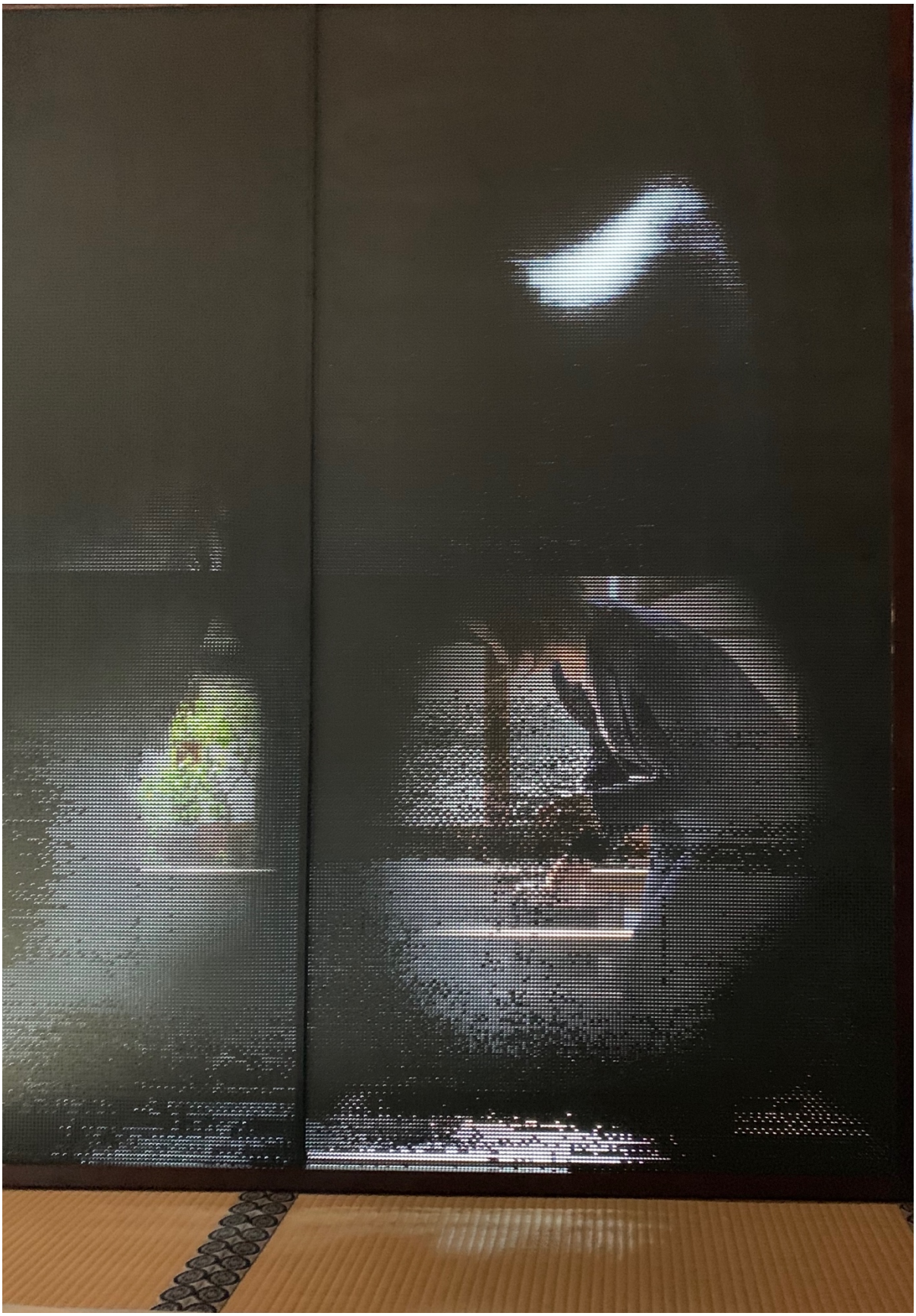
Edging closer towards the installation, I might begin the essay with a biography of the artist. Zheng Chongbin started his training as a brush-and-ink painter in Shanghai during the final years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). As he puts it, "I ended up on the streets, doing things I maybe should not have been doing."[1] His father forced him to do one drawing a day as a way of controlling him, and eventually Zheng began to train his hand with artists who endlessly painted Soviet-style propaganda portraits of Chairman Mao.

Zheng's formal entry into the art world required him to draw deeply on reserves of self-discipline. He failed his first college entrance exams. He persisted, and in 1979 began his studies at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. Zheng recalls, "It was like military life—every morning we would wake up around 6:00 a.m. to study Tang poems, exercise for half an hour, and then come back to have breakfast. Then we'd go back to class and spend the entire morning studying Chinese paintings. Afterwards came lunch, a nap, with art history or literature after that, and then we'd go to the library, have dinner, take a walk by the lake; then at night calligraphy class or more work in the library."

Against this backdrop of regulated study, Zheng began to ask questions – about the weight of paper, opacity of acrylic, the feel of the ink brush in his hand, the "modernity" of aluminum frames to display hanging scrolls. Seeking a different perspective on his practice, in the 1980s he moved to the Bay area and did a degree at the San Francisco Art Institute. Eventually he opened a studio San Rafael, where he painted huge pieces of *xuan* paper lying damply on the cement floor, so that debris from earlier paintings embedded itself into his new work. Around this time, he started to bring the dimensionality of ink into sculptural, shaped pieces, with imperfect, ripped edges; he started to translate ink into installations.

> Chongbin and I have what for me is an unusual relationship. He makes artwork; I write about it, and sometimes curate it. As is the case when you don't see someone in a long time, at this meeting I am reminded of our age, and how odd it is to think of ourselves as old. Chongbin is tall so he stoops slightly to speak with me. He moves with ease through the installation. I watch him as he shows visitors not what to see but how to see, how to change perspectives by bending down, moving closer and farther away from the paper screens, by following the sound of the water trickling over the edges of an outdoor stone basin that is projected as an image in live time, mutely and without clear focus, on a digital screen inside.

[1] See Lisa Claypool, "Architectonic Ink: Zheng Chongbin in Conversation with Lisa Claypool"《营造水墨: 郑重宾与祁珊立的对话》*Yishu: The Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* [Chinese language edition 中文版，《典藏: 國際版文選》] 1, no. 2 (April 2012): 15-24; [English language edition] 10, no. 4 (July 2011): 41-53.



Or I might begin with a story of how the installation was made. While the installation was deeply conceptualized by the artist, it was mostly produced outside of his studio by other hands employing machines and digital media. As is the case with any post-studio art, it tested the limits of what the artist was willing to accept as part of the making of the work, how much slippage between intentionality and result he would be willing to tolerate. For instance, the dull black paper screens mounted on polyurethane are perforated with dotted holes. The dots, once cut, did not drop cleanly away from the paper, and Zheng decided to let them remain fragilely attached. They impart a *shibori* tie-dyed textile-like texture to the surface, and by confusing geometry and impeding the eye, create a kaleidoscopic illusion – after the screens were installed, it was discovered that when one backs away from them, the dots morph, becoming larger, almost plate-sized. Similarly, when the cut plexiglass torqued, Zheng decided to work with its distorted reflections.

> Chongbin works intuitively, and with acute sensitivity to the spaces in which his artwork is going to be installed. During our interview he told me about a site visit he made when he was thinking through *Liquid Space*: "I was impressed by the impact of a big summer storm on Kyoto. Everything was in chaos. So I was thinking about how the tree branches and mosses were being cleared out and pruned back into shape, and how those forms related to the fractal geometry in Hokusai's *Great Wave* (ca. 1826–1833), a picture of another moment of environmental chaos. I was intrigued by the idea of 'chaotic equations' as natural mechanisms for generating change and variation."[2]

[2] Lisa Claypool, "Temple: A Conversation with Zheng Chongbin," *Yishu: The Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 18, no. 4 (October/November 2019): forthcoming.

Finally, I might begin by turning towards the touchstones of so much writing about ink art now: "tradition" and "modernity." Ink painting matters here, as Zheng's installations grow out of his brush-and-ink practice, and reference it. The dotted screens, for instance, can be mapped against the seventeenth-century artist Shitao's handscroll known as the "Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Blots." Just as splotches of ink spread wetly into Shitao's painting surface, the holes in Zheng's screens expand and darkly contract. If such visual connections by default become embodiments of "tradition," the dialogue Zheng takes up with Robert Irwin's (b. 1928) light and space installations bring the work into the realm of "modernity" (or, more compellingly, into the globalized present, which some historians of Chinese art conflate with modernity). It's a conversation about art as non-object, as site-conditional. Hence, *Liquid Space* seemingly actualizes the historical dualisms and binaries described in Julia Andrews' and Shen Kuiyi's recent book, *The Art of Modern China*, as "artistic connections to the universal, the international, the global, the central, [and] the present," on the one hand, and on the other, "ties to the personal, the national, the local, the peripheral, and the past."[3]

> Chongbin and I spend a good amount of time talking about the most glorious part of the installation – a handscroll-sized piece of glass over which ink has slipped, pooled and crystalized into digital form. It is as if it were a petri dish of ink. And I can't help but be an art historian here – the scientism of the piece irresistibly reminds me of art historian John Hay's essays that show us how, across dynastic time, ink was written about by men of letters as if it were the DNA of the cosmos, an embodiment of correlative connectivity between things.[4] Ink blurs subject-object identifications. There never was a moment in history when ink painting wasn't also, effectively, a light and space installation.

[3] Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), xiii.
[4] John Hay, "Surface and the Chinese Painter: The Discovery of Surface," *Archives of Asian Art* vol. 38 (1985): 95-104.

So: art history. My own experience of *Liquid Space* colours each of the short narratives I have drafted above. Nonetheless the prose still does not quite get at the strangeness of being there that possibly is conveyed more fluidly in my notes. Partly that is because the histories are performances of knowledge: names, dates, terms, facts, categories, familiarity with scholarly literature. Mostly it is because those performances, if permitted as they have been here, come to matter more to the writing than the installation itself, as it almost tangibly recedes from view.

To rephrase the original thought driving this project, then: what is it about the *experience* of *Liquid Space* that resists art historical writing about it? And if we mull over the ways that this installation provides an access, described by the artist, "for the viewer to meditate with the past in a sort of time capsule, where the present can be regained,"[5] then it also is fair to ask why is it that the passage of time ended up mattering so much to my own experience of this "time capsule." For lateness (the scattering cherry blossoms and my delayed arrival at the temple), age (the years of my friendship with Chongbin), momentary encounter (that summer storm that came up strong), and duration (conversations over artwork) anchored time into my experience of the installation.

The installation offers up answers, some hinted at or captured in my notes. The context for *Liquid Space*, for instance, is the city, not simply the temple. It is the storm, the cherry trees, the rock gardens and neighborhood beyond them. What's outside is focalized inside the temple space through the installation. Starlings, dragonflies, dripping water, broken tree branches, and dead moss -- all enter the project through blurred images, mesh membranes, patterns of fractal geometry. In a way, that infinite expansion of the environment inside the temple means that there is no there there. This kind of absence reverberates into awareness of how *Liquid Space* is suspended somewhere between pure observation (the geometry of those forms) and pure sensation (the discovery of their transformative quality).

Zheng Chongbin's dance with his visitors through the temple space underscores how personal and individual that experience of the installation can be, though it also is a moment of sharing, and of delight. This is also true of the Senior Priest Itō Taryō-san's incorporation of the installation into group meditation practices. Which is to say, human connectivity swells into that looming absence and fills the space. But it also must be recognized that there is a cross-species dimension to all of this, a decentering of the human. Through the installation the visitor regains the present by returning to the unthought, by bringing the subterranean currents, the messiness, complexity, and brokenness of the life world in.

To dwell on history, then, or to pose questions about context, biography, technology, and to seek after logical explanation, is to dismiss or simply miss out on experience of a space that is strange for its revelatory quality. But revelation here is not about transcendence. It is the opposite. Hidden ecologies slowly flow into and ebb from the liquid space; experience of the present moment is an experience that rests between absence and fullness beyond words.

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[5] Artist's work notes, May 2019.