

# THE LIVINGS

**A series of performance works for the art space.**

von Jianan Qu, MA  
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As a performative continuation of the works, “The livings - A series of performance works for the art space.” I invited the curator Synne Genzmer for a dialogue, to talk about the development, conception and results of this project.

The dialogue took place in April 2017 and lasted about five hours. The following texts are selections of our conversation.

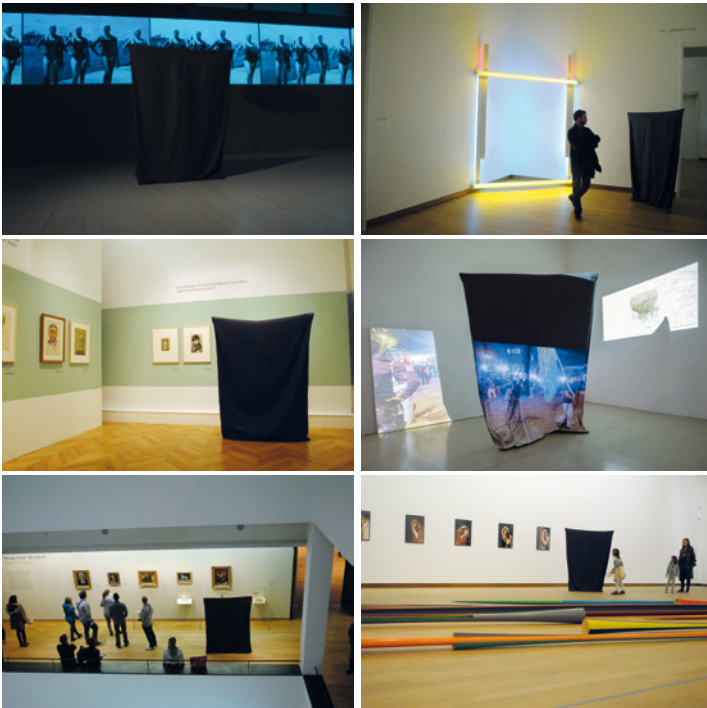
Jianan Qu

## A Conversation with Jianan Qu

Synne Genzmer: You have developed from your experience as a professional performer an artistic practice that explores space through the body and intensified physical or sensual awareness. Against this backdrop you have conceived and produced over the course of a couple of years four pieces: "screening", "view/ers", "paperplane", and "this is the next song". I would like to talk you about concepts and processes and how these four works are related to each other respectively how they can be understood as one body of work. And I am also interested in different ways of documentation that you use and the photographic images and videos that originate or emerge from it. Understood as a group of works you gave the four pieces the title "The livings" – but it is not a closed project, rather more pieces could be added in the future. Let me ask you first: Why did you subsume them under the title "The livings"? It sounds like you understand them as some sort of organisms.

Jianan Qu: It is like going to the woods discovering things there: a mushroom, a squirrel... – those are livings. With my works I am pointing at a few "livings" in the art space that I find interesting or important; I don't create them, I just explore them.

"The livings" belong to where they exist. You can see it or not.



SCREENING, 2015

The screening is a question mark, traveling through museums and art spaces. It opens up the possibility for different interpretations and understandings of the artworks and the exhibition topic. Qu performs as a screen, moving through the exhibition space; offering new space presentations and temporarily re-establishing the connections between the artworks.

### How did your first piece of the four come about?

The first piece is “screening“. It started as a game; I just put myself into a cover of a blanket, performed as an empty screen and walked around in museums, to see how others react to it...

And people loved it, they told me what they saw, some even told me what the work is about, and I thought: That's great! Let them interpret this work!

That was the starting point. Later on I developed the concept, got clearer with what I should do, what I shouldn't and so on...

**As an artist coming from contemporary dance who is following a performative practice, you work a lot with your body but in this case the body becomes an abstract form. The human body disappears behind or rather inside a geometric black form, is negated, hidden or masked.**

I don't disappear – I am just inside.

### You take or occupy space by performing?

There are two kinds of spaces that I am working with, space in the mind, just as how we interpret art works, and the exhibition space. I think I am trying to offer some space for the art space.

### Was it important to you that in this piece people don't see your body?

Maybe, somehow it feels good for me to be 'unseen'... as a performer I of course work a lot with my body, but this work is not about the body. I want people to ask questions and interpret this work freely. When the audience thinks too much about my body, it makes the work a lot weaker.

The performance was most of the time your own intervention – on your own risk as it were – you were not invited by the museum to participate in a show.

Yes, most of the time ‘screening’ happened with no invitation, sometimes I got kicked out.

Of course if security guards send you out it is some kind of disturbance of the space and of the institutional frame, but the viewers themselves they would actually think it is an art piece, they would not necessarily perceive it as a disturbance, or?

I don’t think so. On one hand the work is definitely an eye-catcher, but at the same time it is also light and neutral; when someone comes with a problem, everyone sees it...

Yes, you could be a danger to the artwork – you could jump out with a knife and destroy the painting... it is a potential danger...

I had that thought when I was covering a van Gogh.

If we look at the documentation of “screening”, there are various museum spaces including iconic art pieces that you situate yourself next to. In a way you inscribe yourself not only on the level of space but also on a symbolic level into the realm of the museum. In the first image [1], we see your piece “screening”, the black rectangle and a body next to it.

The body, ah, it is a performance work of Tino Sehgal, who sees the body as a living sculpture...

So we have the relation to another artwork and by accident (or not) there are two living sculptures – one let’s say is figurative, one is



1



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abstract. And they are both constituted by an understanding of duration and time and ephemeral moments, and both pieces create rather images for the memory than in an object-based way. I wonder if something happened between you and the Tino Seghal performer.

I think I covered her, she was moving very slowly on the floor. I caught much attention...

Would you say by covering her like in the other cases that you decreased or increased the attention that she got?

I am not sure.

But you created a kind of dialogue with this other artwork?

Maybe a forced dialogue.

There is another documentary image [2] of "screening" where you cover an artwork.

This was in the van Gogh museum – I don't remember which work was behind, could be the "Sunflowers"? I just stood in front of it. It was a very short moment before I disappeared. The security check was kind of heavy; people were not allowed to bring bags. So the blanket is so big, you can't bring it – so I wrapped it around my neck, went in as if it would be a scarf, a fashionable large scarf.

And they let you in?

Yes.

You went in with the blanket as a scarf, then you posed as a black screen – maybe – in front of the "Sunflowers" by van Gogh. Interesting that you don't know it any more. I would have to do research to find out about it – but then, the hanging could have changed in the meantime... You posed for just a short moment, right?

Short, then I kept on visiting the museum, because I wanted to see van Gogh's work.

**Wearing the "screen" as a scarf again? So you continuously changed between being a performer and being a visitor yourself?**

Yes.

**What about this image [3]? Could you elaborate on that?**

I think that was in the city museum of Amsterdam, and there was a Malevich exhibition. In that exhibition the "Black Square" – the most famous work – was missing; but I did not plan it – I did not plan to be the living "Black Square". ▶



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VIEW/ERS, 2016 - 2017

The museum is the meeting place for art and people, the artworks are there to be observed. But could the observation be turned into an art itself? Could it make us face each other? Jianan Qu challenges the possible roles of being a viewer, establishes a reflective, sensible atmosphere and turns the museum space into a live platform of activities and happenings.

Are we in front of art or are we in front of each other?

► **“screening” was the first piece of the four: how did you move on to the next one? How did it evolve from that?**

After “screening” I got an invitation to make a performance work in the Ludwig Museum, Budapest. There I made the second piece “view/ers”.

So, I held an open call, whoever was interested to take a research workshop with me could apply – we were going to explore the museum space. In the end I brought nine artists with me to Budapest for a week, and there I raised a question: As viewers are such an important element in art space, why aren’t we observing each other? In an art space like the Secession, we look at the exhibits, the architecture, the Art Nouveau designs, we observe everything but not the visitors. Somehow they don’t belong there, you know... I found it interesting how people behave there, how people are engaged with the space, how they relate to the art works. The art space is made for people but somehow we behave like they are not important.

After seven days of working, I made a video work. That’s the “view/ers”. In October 2017 I am going to make a live performance in the Ludwig, it will be the second edition of this piece.

**For “view/ers” you had nine performers.**

Yes, we had more but some did not take part in the whole process.

**And did you give them instructions how to explore these relations between themselves, the space, the objects and visitors?**

Yes, most of the tasks were just questions in my head: What if the exhibits do not want to be observed? What if the plastic sculpture feels like a bronze sculpture? How could we let the exhibits and the space observe us? How to be united with the exhibition space? How to behave ‘normal’ but visible? ... Basically I brought up a question, and

we looked for ways to do it.

We were trying out things. One of the tasks was ‘role switch’. For example we made poses or actions to be seen as art works, to explore how does it feel like to be observed by others. How this affected other visitors was very interesting. Sometimes I would ask someone to become a sculpture, then I asked others what they want to do with this work. People were touching the ‘sculpture’, beating, or kissing it. I always wanted to kiss the museum sculptures! I mean not all of them...

**For ‘normal’ visitors, it is a performance that mirrors themselves, and then might activate different levels of thinking or reflection or awareness while going through the museum. On your documentary images you can’t really always for certain distinguish between the performers and the visitors. So the structure of the art work is entangled with the reality of the actual viewers and thus also creates a sort of uncertainty about what the art work is as such, where its margins are – I wonder if you have considered that before?**

Yes, I was sure from the beginning that I didn’t want to make a border between the performers and the visitors. We are all viewers and views for each other, like the title: “view/ers”. I thought it important for ‘normal’ visitors to see us as a ‘normal’ thing, it shouldn’t look too strange, and otherwise we might be far away from each other.

My main task was to make the performers a part of the space. Once we achieve that, everything we did was allowed and no longer strange. Somehow this relaxed their behaviours, and they became more reachable.

In a way you could also say that we are all performing as museum visitors...

**Is it also your intention to transform the authority of the institution – or at least to open it up? I have the impression that you initiate a kind**





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of perforation process that augments the exchange between the inside of the museum and the outside of the public.

It's like getting to know someone. The polite distance could be erased by experiencing something together.

There is a very strong photograph of a woman looking into an object in a vitrine [4]. Could you comment on that?

Paula, that was a task 'to be invisible but visible'. Invisible means the action needs to be perfectly normal, but something needs to be a bit different or special. She worked with her body and the way to approach the exhibit, like this you can see her spine and her back and also her body is kind of united with the object on display. She became part of the view.

Like the question you pose with the piece: "What if viewing art can be art itself?"

Yes.

So the object that she is looking at is absent in the photo, you only see the gesture of looking – with the whole body.

Yes, you see her relation to the exhibit.

It is almost a caressing gesture... What about the next image: a woman looking at a wall [5]?

This one was exactly the same task. Getting involved in a museum's space in a visible but invisible way. She was looking at the blank wall, at the space between the art works.



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And this one?

She was giving a speech. One day I asked everyone to write something...

And they wrote their own texts? About the project or an artwork?

Anything they wanted in relation to the project. Someone wrote a totally boring opening speech for a politician who has no idea about art and what to say. "... Let's celebrate! Cheers!" – I like the ending very much.

It sounds like a caricature.

So weird to listen to it... absurd, but totally confident.

But we do listen to it quite often actually and very seriously indeed. It is a performance of our everyday culture, and we have not yet found another way to do it better, I guess, and for a politician it must feel natural in a way. It is a ritual. A ritual that strengthens and confirms power. On some level it is even needed in favour of the arts, to elevate them, but on a certain level of course it seems ridiculous. There is hardly a way to perform this ritual in an authentic way or if you are too authentic you may come over as being unprofessional. So you better think of it as a performance, which it is.

Let us talk about the next image, which is very different to the others, where a group of performers are pointing to certain art works in a very direct way with their arms respectively fingers [6]. It seems a rather unconventional gesture of how to relate to an artwork and it looks very choreographed, staged. What is this situation about – also in comparison to the other ones?



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Again it came from a task. The first day after arriving at the Ludwig Museum I saw a young boy pointing at a work, I didn't know what he wanted to say or what the gesture was about: polite or impolite? Was it about interest, or power? Or connection? There were so many layers of information mixed in one gesture. So we started to work with 'pointing at a work'.

It is a very strong gesture.

And for example there were visitors who had no idea, just stepped in the museum and saw all of us pointing at the one work, guess what? They had to look at that work, no choice. They assumed that work was important.

Later on we tried different variations of this task, all different directions, on the floor...etc. as you see on the photo. ►



PAPERPLANE, 2017

A way of traveling through the museum space: Blow away an empty art description paper and follow it around.

Visitors tend to approach the description paper in a different way to the exhibited art works or the museum space. The approach is physical and alters the kind of connection visitors have to the space and the exhibits. While in following the description paper, which is sailing randomly through the exhibition space, only forced to the ground by its body weight and the smoothness of the paper flow, the 'viewer' takes a different course through the space.

This poetic access softens the meaning and the function of the description paper.

► Let us move on to the next piece: "paperplane".

Yes, the idea of "paperplane" was discovered through working on "view/ers".

I was observing the difference between how people approach the artwork and the paper... In museums, people don't talk loud, there's no mobile phones, no running around, rather some kind of seriousness and appreciation. But with this piece of paper people just grab it, wave it around making a funny sound, fold it a few times and put it into their pockets, some even throw it away after a few seconds of reading. That's very interesting. The description paper explains to us what the exhibition is about, who are the artists, it is supposed to offers us a better understanding of what we are going to see, if we respect the artworks, maybe we should pay respect to the paper too?

So I gave myself two tasks: 1) No touching – as most art works are not allowed to be touched. 2) It should guide me through the exhibition. – Then I went into the Secession and made my first 'paperplane'.

**You are using a white sheet of paper – there is no exhibition text on it.**

No text, it is the representation of all description papers.

**How did people react in the Secession?**

People were really calm, they looked at me, but very soon they found out that I was just busy with something, nothing dangerous or provocative, then they went on looking at the exhibition. Somehow there is nothing wrong or strange. Not even for the securities. Of course I didn't ask for permission.

You know, if the guards do come, I will tell them that I am a visitor, it is my way of observing the exhibition, and I look at things from the floor.

You said that?

I didn't need to... no one came. I mean there is no regulation that people can't look at artworks from the floor.

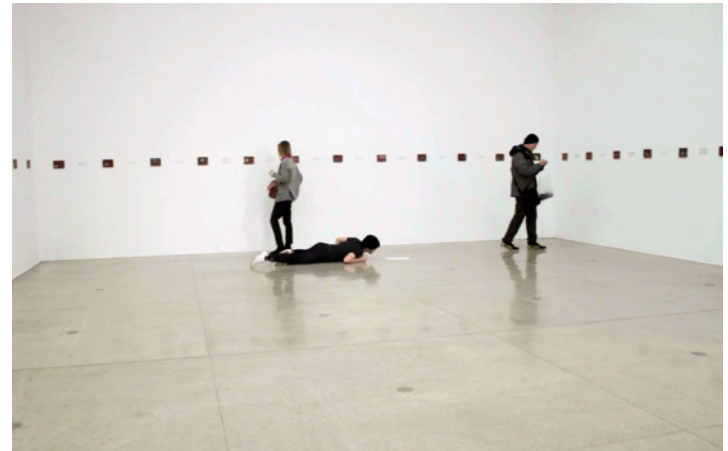
Well, usually you would be asked to behave properly – like not to eat and drink in an exhibition, not to shout, not to use your mobile phone, etc. – and maybe not to crawl on the floor. But it seems to be an uncategorized action – it is not on the list of what is forbidden.

Yes, I was there for a long time. I looked at the whole exhibition of Francis Alÿs, and even blew the paper out of the Secession's door. It was such a harmony.

Do you choose exhibitions because of the artist? Because there are many pieces by Francis Alÿs where he takes up the motif of walking or moving through space. You could relate to his artistic practice...

I know, but it was just a coincidence. I was thinking more about the Secession and its history, it was good to raise the description paper topic there...

But it is an interesting coincidence. Francis Alÿs often works in public space or outdoor – if you think of his piece "The green line" for example, or when he drove a car from The Netherlands to Russia crossing country borders for the Manifesta in St. Petersburg. However, in "paper-plane" and "screening" an important point is, I think, that you ignore the power structures of the institution as such by simply going to the space and performing as a single person, without official permission, without the director or curator knowing about it, without collaborators or participants or security arrangements. You also intervene with the viewers indirectly. What I find interesting beyond that is that the description



usually provides a kind of pre-produced meaning, ready to consume for the viewer in order to inform him or her what the art is about. By contrast, you take the plane paper as a projection surface. It also recalls the phenomenon or myth of the so-called fear of the empty surface, like in the case of a writer in front of the white empty paper or the artist in front of the white empty canvas.

It leaves space.

It is very beautiful. You stayed in touch with floor the whole time, right?

Sometimes I rested a bit... it is easier to walk you know...

What about "this is the next song"? You are writing the sentence with water. ►



THIS IS THE NEXT SONG, 2017

“this is the next song” is a typical sentence the singer of a band would say to introduce the title of the coming song, after which the audience would be silent and expecting...

Jianan Qu ‘writes’ the sentence with a wet cleaning rag on the white museum wall. Leaving the audience to the fading sentence, the piece questions the role of expectation in the art space. As it dries, the wall itself becomes the performer.

- Yes, basically I write this sentence with a wet cleaning rag, let people watch it until it dries and disappears totally.

#### How fast?

It depends on the wall pigment. Some are like two or three minutes, some a bit longer.

**It is creating suspense, I assume, and thereby reflecting upon the expectation of something to come – like the spectacle one is going to witness...**

You know the situation in a concert, someone announces: “fire fire fire! – This is our next song!” then everybody gets excited and are expecting the music... in this moment the performance has started already. There is a contrast between ‘this’ and ‘next’, it is somehow wrong, but also right. There is no difference anymore when people are involved in the show, the same thing in an exhibition. When you are thinking, expecting, talking about something, no matter how intensively you do it, before even being there everything begins already. It is almost an invisible act, but an interesting one.

I want to face to this invisible act, to see what elements we need in order to have that in the context of art space. Therefore in this work it is important to reduce information and participants, there is only: audience, the fading sentence, me (shortly), the wall and the art space. It is a temporary thing, when the sentence disappears, what is left then?

**... on the one hand it's about breaking barriers in regard of what we think about art spaces as institutions and how this concept produces realities and exactly those barriers. Your work tries to break with that in a certain way, doesn't it? It also poses the questions,**



'How the present could be transformed in order to establish a different relationship towards art' and 'How we can deal with art institutions which integrate this way of increasing expectations as part of a power strategy in order to sustain the kind of respect that history provides them with' – and therefore using mechanisms such as celebrity culture in order to produce desire, to attract visitors and to stay or become relevant. I see your strategy as a possibility to perforate and undermine those structures or membranes also in terms of codes and behaviour. Maybe it is about showing people a way how to deal with these issues and encouraging them to search for their own approach to art.

Somehow, the same space, facing different realities.

Does it have something to do with calligraphy?

No, I didn't think of that.

So it is not referring to visual representation systems such as writing or drawing but more to the reality of the exhibition situation – as a simple gesture, in a minimalist manner, which could be said about all four pieces of "The livings".

Instead of simple I would consider them rather as neutral. Giving space to the topics that I found interesting, I try to be precise but open at the same time...

With an indexical quality. There is on the one hand a strong site-specific approach to a place. You relate with your performances to questions on a structural level by finding ways of intervening with yourself and your body. What I find particularly interesting is the way the works connect to physical sensations that we are not always aware of. And furthermore you refer to a sociological level and question the power relations of cultural institutions as such and their production of meaning and again, how we can relate to that as an individual.

Just pointing at things.

Maybe pointing but without a finger, more surrounding it? •

Vienna, April 2017

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