

On the value of being alone



Multimedia designer and artist Qiong Li on intuition, improvisation, and being a human camera

May 19, 2021 - Qiong Li is a Chinese designer and artist working with videos, books, posters, music, and performance. She received her MFA from Yale in 2016.

As told to Laurel Schwulst, 1640 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Design](#), [Inspiration](#), [Identity](#), [Independence](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#).

You sang a list of colors for TCI's [first weekend event](#). Can you tell me more about your singing?

I remember the first time I decided to incorporate my singing as a new element in my work. It was during a workshop at Yale when I sang "Happy Birthday." At the time, I was feeling sad because I was in a foreign country for the first time, and I felt awkward announcing my birthday to new people, so I kept it a secret and spent my birthday alone. It turned out I very much enjoyed it. Singing "Happy Birthday" was a way of celebrating my own time.

I also do this "alone birthday."

Yeah, every birthday I can do something new. Like watching a new movie, going to a new place, simple things like that. I usually feel kind of awkward with a group of people.

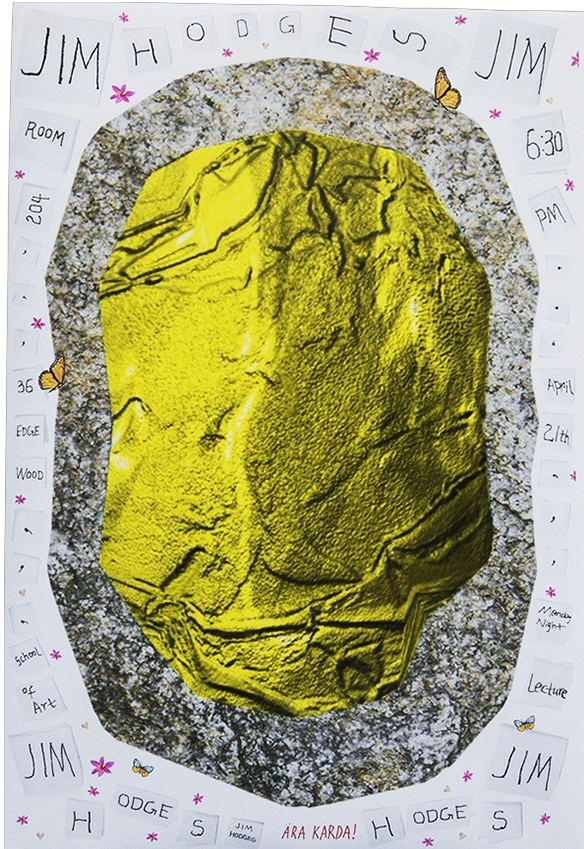
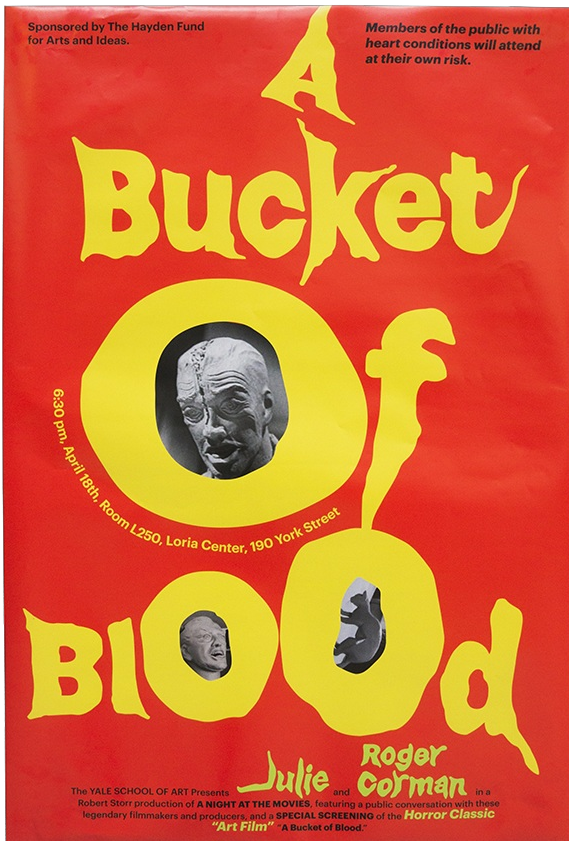
Tell me about your childhood.

When I was little, people would ask me, "Who do you want to be?" I would ask back, "Why do I have to be one person? Why can't I be painter, singer, model, actor, and writer? Why do I have to be one person?"

I did lots of drawings. I locked myself in my room; I didn't want to speak to anyone. I would put a big A0 sheet of paper on the floor. I would sit on the paper and draw some Japanese cartoons. I sang a lot in my room. I stayed up really late doing this, which was "bad," but I really enjoyed it.

I remember having urges like, "I need to do calligraphy now!" and then I would simply get all my calligraphy supplies ready and do it immediately. Once I ran out of ink, but there was a typhoon outside. But I absolutely couldn't wait to do calligraphy, so I just ran to the store right before closing in the rain and bought the last ink they had. As you grow older and with "professional" training, this urge lessens. Especially in a job, it's easy to want everything to be perfect and well-planned, but something is missing. What's missing is this impulse, like the feeling of writing your true thoughts down really quickly. When this happens, you should appreciate imperfection because there are many times in life when you'll be required to embrace the status quo, like when choosing among the available tools, environments, and people. So when it happens, you should embrace improvisation and do it right now.

That's why I've done so many improvisations. Like when I was helping install Karel Martens' show, I had the impulse to sing a page from his book where he listed all these colors. I just recorded my singing with my iPhone. I recorded many times after the live performance, but the version I preferred was one of the first, maybe because there were so many mispronunciations and it felt the most alive. The other versions felt too polished and somehow became a bit tasteless.



Posters for the Monday Night Lecture Series at Yale, 2016.

That sounds like a collaboration.

For me, collaboration is difficult. I usually work alone. I think collaboration only works when it comes along naturally, not when it's forced at the beginning.

I think it's a good idea to spend time with someone if you want to communicate with them well. Good communication needs your attention and love. It's sort of like cooking. Eventually, once a relationship is more "cooked," you shouldn't feel a boundary with this person. Although I'm still figuring out how, I learned this from Karel Martens. Karel always begins his workshop at Yale by meeting individually with each student at his or her own desk. He tries to understand each student personally before going further.

I remember another collaborative work you did called Art Production Line. Can you tell me how it came about?

I remember being "stuck" at the time. I was always coming and going between my studio and home. Go to studio, go home. I didn't know what to do. At the time, I was already doing a lot of video capture at home, and I decided that's enough! People have seen enough of my domestic space, so I wanted to do something in the shared space. In the atrium at school, there are swings, tables, gadgets, clay, all lying around. How could I connect all of them, I wondered. I remember ideas came while we were playing. I was on the swing, my friend pushed me, and then I realized I could use that as a way of designing something, like a t-shirt. Also, because I'm interested in so many things: photography, video, graphic design, etc., this work connected all of them. We all enjoyed it. It was like playing around, like a playground.



Stills from Art Production Line, 2015

Why did you move to New York?

To find a job. You have to be social to find work, which can be a problem for me.

Where are your favorite places to find solitude in New York?

I find most of my solitude in my own room. While at school, I had enormous time to watch films, sing, write, read, play the keyboard, etc. I call this my absorbing time. It's so important to me to have time and space to dive and be immersed.

I also enjoy being in a piano room (could be anywhere). I don't need to play any perfect melodies. Sometimes I just like playing some simple notes to clear my head.

When I return home from work late at 2 or 3am, usually no people are on the street. At this time of night, I feel very free somehow. I listen to music and walk zigzag and sometimes dance along the road. I look at the sky, the surroundings. It feels so good. No one can see me.

It doesn't matter if it's super mundane or it's new, as long as I am experiencing something by myself it is valuable. I like going to the IFC to watch a film alone. I like walking to IKEA to wander around and secretly hug all the stuffed animals. It's always nice to take a walk outside after being in my room for a long time, absorbing.



Still from *Art Production Line*, 2015

Why is being alone so important?

When I'm alone, I become more sensitive to my surroundings. I am more aware of my path, if I like the color of this building, or if I remember that dirty plastic bag floating under the sunshine and onto the mud. If I were with a group, I might not notice these things because you need to talk to people and follow the group. I like to have my own pace and rhythm and not worry about following or catching the group. When I'm alone, I feel like a human camera.



MORE Digital Billboard, 2016

What do you mean, "human camera"?

You feel everything around you completely, and every pore of your body has a zoom-in function. When I'm in my room, I try to be a sponge. I can absorb a ton and learn by myself. It's like having a journey. You are searching and collecting pieces that belong to you. There is a lot of joy in finding something that intrigues you.

I feel there is more "nutrition" in solitude, and I consider myself to be more productive alone. Solitude can be very philosophical because it's both very closed and very open. In being alone, people feel you are distant, that you don't like socializing that much, and that you live in a vacuum; but at the same time, you are so open to the world: you are listening, smelling, tasting, looking, learning, making, interacting, and feeling.

You need lots of "nutrition" if you do so many things!

It's very important for me not to be "one person". I enjoy being a multimedia designer or artist, shuffling from this to that. On my [website](#) and in my thesis book, you will see pieces of my writing, photocopies of my photographs, still images from my videos, typography from my books, small printing tests for my posters. The content varies from weird obsessions to design criticism. People may think I don't have a point of focus, or people might doubt I am an expert of anything. But experts are often great at many things at the same time.

Qiong Li recommends:

Inuit throat singing, [The Love Song](#)

Maybe the most strange love song I have ever heard. I somehow like the strange eroticism, the animalism, the brutal and the rawness of the human voice. When I heard this, I was like, oh, our voices can be like that!

[Baby's Breath](#)

I used to have one when I was a kid. I love observing them after dinner when the sky gets dark in summer. The small white flowers are like little stars or shining zoomed-in particles. They are breathtaking.

Some nice films to watch if you haven't seen

Alice in the Cities by Wim Wenders (1974), *Happy Together* by Wong Kar-Wai (1997), *News from Home* by Chantal Akerman (1977), *Dogtooth* by Yorgos Lanthimos (2010), *Badlands* by Terrence Malick (1973).

[UbuWeb](#)

Great resource I want to spend more time with.

[The Artist's Date](#)

Spend some time alone doing something you are curious about. All by yourself and have fun. They are always my best moments!

[Name](#)

Qiong Li

[Vocation](#)

Designer, Artist

[Fact](#)

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Tonje Thilesen