Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 58 (2004)

Heft: 3: Performing cultures in East Asia : China, Korea, Japan

Artikel: Performing craftsmanship : the practice of painting in pre-modern China

Autor: Pohl, Karl-Heinz

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147639

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PERFORMING CRAFTSMANSHIP: THE PRACTICE OF PAINTING IN PRE-MODERN CHINA

Karl-Heinz Pohl, University of Trier

Shakespeare once remarked: "Life is a stage, and all of us are mere players upon it." Ages have gone by during which this remark had almost fallen into oblivion. Recently, however, the notion seems to have come back with force, particularly in the social and cultural studies, that everything is drama, that all is performance. Sociologists now teach us about the "dramaturgical" aspects in "the presentation of self in everyday life,"[1] and gender theorists want us to believe that gender is not just a social construct (not to mention biology), but rather a kind of performance[2], a show we put on, a set of signs we wear as costume or disguise. Not being a specialist in these fields, I will refrain here from further discussion on the question as to whether these notions have a crucial theoretical value in the mentioned studies, something worth more than Shakespeare's insightful *apercu* about the *theatrum mundi*. Instead, I will enter into a field that generally is not associated with performative aspects – that is, the visual arts, in the specific Chinese context: calligraphy and painting.

Michael Sullivan, the well-known historian of Chinese art, once remarked, "The idea of a painter performing before an audience was virtually unknown in the West before the twentieth century. It was not uncommon in China, however."[3] Sullivan might have had in mind contemporary Western happening artists or action painters. Regarding China, however, we cannot limit the discussion to

1 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York 1959.

2 Judith Butler, "Gender as Performance", in Peter Osborne, ed., *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*, London & New York 1996, pp. 108–125.

3 Cited after Gao Jianping, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Art – From Calligraphy to Painting*, Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1996 (Aesthetica Upsaliensis 7), p. 78. This essay owes much to Gao Jianping's book. In my view, Gao's study (his doctoral dissertation at the University of Uppsala) is one of the best on Chinese art. Unfortunately, it is virtually unknown among Western scholars, possibly because – as a publication of a Swedish university press – it is not available through normal bookstores.

painting, as painting and calligraphy form a peculiar unity. Thus, in this paper, these two arts will be discussed together.

Comments regarding the similarity between painting and calligraphy in terms of their *execution* and their expressive qualities had already been made in some very early texts on Chinese painting.[4] Calligraphy, however, was the earlier developed art form, and the artistic sensitivity of the Chinese literati was based upon the principles of calligraphy. In addition, Chinese calligraphy, as the artistic writing of texts, is by its very nature a fusion of artistic and scholarly activities. A calligraphic rendering of a text can be seen as a graphic *performance* thereof, thus making the reading of the text not only a literary but also a visually artistic experience. In this respect, calligraphy can be seen as forming a link between literature and painting.

In China it was, indeed, quite common that at soirées or banquets, hosts – in case they were collectors or connoisseurs – would show some of their collected treasures, and the guests would admire the artistic qualities of the masters of old. And, in accordance with Sullivan's observation, after a few cups of wine, those among the guests who were high literati often – under the admiring eyes of the others – took up the brush, writing appreciating colophons and poems on paintings or adding remarks to pieces of calligraphy. Some very famous paintings of old thus often bear numerous inscriptions along with the imprints of collectors' seals.[5] This practice, however, was not limited to writing on works of others; it also involved creative writing and painting independently from former masters (or contemporaries). This practice of performing calligraphy or painting at banquets has survived in China until today.

As Gao Jianping 高建平 pointed out, however, it would be wrong to assume that all Chinese painters and calligraphers enjoyed performing publicly instead of practicing their art privately. The contrary is the case: private practice was – for several reasons[6] – still more widespread than public. And yet there is not only this possibility but – at least for the great masters – even a predilection for performing these crafts publicly. This leads to the question as to the specific

4 Cf., for example, the *Lidai minghua ji* 历代名画记 (Record of the Famous Painters of all the Dynasties) by Zhang Yanyuan 张彦远 of the Tang dynasty, translated in William R. B. Acker, *Some T'ang and Pre-T'ang Texts on Chinese Painting*, Leiden 1954.

5 Here we encounter another interesting peculiarity of Chinese painting: the idea that a work of art is not sacrosanct but can be enhanced by appreciative additions of other artists or men of letters – just imagine the Mona Lisa bearing 3–4 inscriptions about Leonardo's skill and spiritual power!

6 Gao Jianping, p. 75–76.

elements in Chinese painting and calligraphy that allow performative aspects to come into play. There are basically three characteristics that need to be highlighted:

1. The representational (or mimetic) function of art is not so important in the Chinese literati tradition. To the Chinese literati, it mattered not so much *what* was painted but *how* something was painted – or rather *how* somebody painted.[7] This characteristic, of course, also originates in calligraphy in which the representational function does not play a role. In calligraphy, the focus of attention is on execution, i.e., on the brushstroke. Consequently, the calligraphic brushstroke became an essential element of literati painting (*wenren hua* 文人画). An evaluation of a Chinese painting by the literati would inevitably focus on calligraphic qualities, such as strength of brushstroke or "bone" (*gu* 骨), fluidity of line, ink value etc. Particularly in the *wenren hua* tradition, calligraphic aspects outweigh everything else. In addition, there is a host of references and treatises in which the representational aspect – the so-called "formal likeness" – is downplayed in comparison to abstract, if not spiritual qualities such as "*chuanshen* 传神" ("transmitting the spirit")[8]. Later on, Su Shi 苏轼 (1036–1101), in the Song period, even remarked that discussing painting in terms of formal likeness reflects the artistic understanding of a child.[9]

When we have an emphasis on the *how* of painting, the creative or expressive act plays a stronger role than the outcome, the actual product, for example, compositional aspects of a work of art. But this focus on the creative act even involves the process of reception and appreciation. In appreciating a work of calligraphy, the aesthetic pleasure of the viewer is precisely in following the movement of the brush and tracing the play of the lines. The connoisseur can thus participate in the creative act or recreate, as it were, the viewed work of art in his own mind. Due to the emphasis on the *how* of painting/calligraphy, we have here more an aesthetics of production (and reception) rather than an aesthetics of product/object.

2. Chinese painting and calligraphy are a form of *gongfu* 功夫. This means that they aim at high perfection through arduous training. In this regard they are

7 See Gao Jianping, p. 87.

8 The expression "transmitting the spirit" is ascribed to the early painter Gu Kaizhi 顾恺之 (ca. 345–406), see Acker, II. 1, p. 44; II. 2, p. 68.

9 Lin Yutang, *The Chinese Theory of Art*, New York 1967, p. 92.

often compared to other performing arts to which the category *gongfu* also applies, such as the martial arts, boxing ("kungfu"), sword dance etc. Here, we also find a spiritual dimension, as the notion of self-cultivation plays an important role in the practice of these arts. It is common to all of them that the training usually takes place privately, and that it is only the master who, after a long process of cultivation, will be able to perform his craft in public. This is, of course, hardly different from the practice of certain arts in the Western classical tradition: only after arduous training (based on a solid talent) can a musician or a dancer (also a gymnast) perform before an audience and make it seem effortless.

3. There are performative aspects in Chinese art even when it is *not* performed before an audience. Four specific points appear to be relevant in both painting and calligraphy regarding this peculiarity:

- There is an order or sequential movement in calligraphy in which characters have to be written. Even bamboo or landscape paintings follow a certain sequential pattern of movement. Because of this trait, painting and calligraphy have the character of being a process, and this, again, is more conducive to an aesthetics of production rather than one of product.
- There are no touch ups. A stroke is a stroke, and a character is a character. There is no way to improve upon a piece of calligraphy once it is written. If an artist is not satisfied with certain strokes, he usually discards the whole piece. Thus, in writing or painting, a kind of concentration like in the performing arts is necessary. They are, as it were, arts of the moment in which timing matters and every stroke counts – just as in a fight or in the martial arts. But they are not as ephemeral as other traditional arts of the moment (such as music [10]), for they leave traces behind through which the very moment of creation – in the eyes of the viewer – can come back to life again.
- Chinese aesthetics gives higher value to the line rather than the color. In comparison to the line, which is considered to contain something like a spiritual value,[11] color is considered to be rather vulgar. Emphasis on the line also concerns such notions as strength (*bili* 笔力) as well as momentum and gesture (*shi* 势) of the brushstroke, because these are the forces that determine the dynamic flow and the expressive quality of the line. Needless to say, gesture and momentum are also central elements in other performing arts.

The highest quality in Chinese painting is "spiritual resonance" (*qiyun* 气韵) which is thought of as a quality of aliveness or live movement (*shengdong* 生动). Although this is considered to be a quality of the work, there is – via the notion of "vital energy" (*qi* 气) – a definite relationship to the personality of the

10 This does not, of course, apply anymore to today's music, as we are living in an age, as Walter Benjamin noted, of the mechanical reproduction of the work of art.

11 Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty*, Oxford 1994, p. 37.

artist. This may come across as a certain spiritual presence or power of the artists which can be appreciated particularly when performing.

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There are countless anecdotes in Chinese aesthetic literature in which these performative aspects of Chinese art are highlighted. Let us, in the following pages, review some of them and try to classify them according to the aspects mentioned. In some of the earlier Chinese classics, such as in *Zhuangzi* 庄子, we have a number of stories that are decisive for an aesthetics of performance in the arts. As these are stories mostly in the Daoist tradition, we may also assume that there are some key Daoist notions (such as natural creativity, spontaneity, etc.) in these specific Chinese arts of the moment.

What will emerge, first of all, is a focus on the unusual – if not eccentric – personality, such as in the following story about a painter whose quality was recognized without him using the brush at all:

> Lord Yuan of Song[12] wanted to have some pictures painted. The crowd of court clerks all gathered in his presence, received their drawing panels, and took their places in line, licking their brushes, mixing their inks, so many of them that there were more outside the room than inside it. There was one clerk who arrived late, sauntering in without the slightest haste. When he received his drawing panel, he did not look for a place in line, but went straight to his own quarters. The ruler sent someone to see what he was doing, and it was found that he had taken off his robes, stretched out his legs, and was sitting there half-naked (*jieyi panbo* 解衣般礴). "Very good," said the ruler. "This is a true artist!"[13]

Attention is given here to the untrammeled spirit of the artist in question. The relaxed manner in which we find him in this story – disrobed with his legs stretched and sitting half-naked (*jieyi panbo*) – has become proverbial for a carefree attitude and an untrammeled spirit. We could say, it is the "style" which "is the man", or putting it in Chinese terms: "Painting (or calligraphy or poetry) is like the person" (*hua/shu/shi ru qi ren* 画/书/诗如其人). This story marks the beginning of a tradition of artists who, particularly from the Tang period on, were put in a special category: the *yipin* 逸品 or untrammeled class, which, for the true connoisseurs, was considered higher than even the highest of the other

12 For reasons of consistency, I have changed all the romanization in the citations to *pinyin*.
13 Burton Watson (Transl.), *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, New York 1968, p. 228.

three classes (*pin* 品): able, wonderful, and god-like (*neng* 能, *miao* 妙, *shen* 神).

In the Tang, we encounter some more of these artists such as Zhang Zao 张璪 or Wang Xia 王洽 (alternatively also called: Wang Mo 王默 or "Ink" Wang 王墨). In the following story about a painting performance by Zhang Zao, we find the artist in a pose similar to that of the artist in *Zhuangzi*:

> The deep porch was richly decorated, the wine cups and food dishes were fine. In the courtyard there were bamboos scattered in the sunlit air – a delightful scene. The master, spoiled with the generous gifts of Heaven, suddenly appeared at the party, roughly demanding fresh silk to display his extraordinary art. The host gathered his robes about him, got to his feet and answered him with a shout. On that occasion there were twenty-four guests, seated to left and right, who heard this (encounter). They all stood up and stared at Zhang Zao. Right in the middle of the room he sat down with his legs spread out, took a deep breath, and his inspiration began to issue forth. Those present were as startled as if lightning were shooting across the heavens or a whirlwind sweeping up into the sky. Ravaging and pulling, spreading in all directions, the ink seemed to be spitting from his flying brush. He clapped his hands with a cracking sound. Dividing and drawing together, suddenly strange shapes were born. When he had finished, there stood pine trees, scaly and riven, crags steep and precipitous, clear water and turbulent clouds. He threw down his brush, got up and looked around in every direction. It seemed as if the sky had cleared after a storm, to reveal the true essence of the ten thousand things.[14]

Once Bi Hong 毕宏, a famous painter of Zhang Zao's time, asked Zhang about the secret of his art, as the latter liked to paint with blunt brushes and also used his fingers. Zhang Zao responded: "Externally, all Creation is my master. Internally, I have found the mind's sources." Thereupon, Bi Hong is said to have put away his brushes.[15] The Daoist message seems to be that creativity in the arts is like creativity of nature that comes forth naturally and spontaneously, and this is also the secret of Zhang Zao's performance.

Similar things can be said about Zhang Zao's rather obscure contemporary Wang Mo (d. ca. 800). Zhang Yanyuan 张彦远, the Tang art historian, describes the unusual method of his action painting: "When drunk he would take ink on his hair and paint by tossing it upon silk." Wang's unusual personality must have been somewhat too wild for the cultivated taste of the art historian, so he concludes that "he lacked loftiness and distinction."[16] Zhu Jingxuan 朱景玄,

14 Gao Jianping, p. 79; Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih (Eds.), *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, Cambridge, Mass. 1985, p. 85.

15 Bush and Shih, p. 65.

16 Ibid, p. 66.

another historian of Tang painting, seems to have had a better opinion of him. In the following description of his painting act, we also find a reference to the above-mentioned parallel between art and natural creativity:

> He excelled in splattering ink to paint landscapes, hence he was called 'Ink Wang.' [...] There was a good deal of wildness in him, and he loved wine. Whenever he wished to paint a hanging scroll, he would first drink, then after he was drunk he would splatter ink. Laughing or singing, he would kick at it with his feet or rub it with his hands, sweep [with his brush] or scrub, with the ink sometimes pale and sometimes dark. According to the forms and appearances [thus produced], he would make mountains and rocks, clouds and water. The response of hand to thought was as swift as Creation itself. He would draw in clouds and mists, and wash in wind and rain, as if with a divine dexterity. One can look closely and see no traces of the ink blots. Everyone finds this miraculous.[17]

One can tell, although the record does not relate if an audience was present, that there is a definite performative quality in the way the act of his painting is described. Zhang Zao's and Wang Mo's art must have been truly an art of the moment, and the ephemeral quality of their art of the moment appears to be underlined in that we do not have any surviving works by either one of them.

Apart from the untrammeled artist, a dominant theme in a Daoist aesthetics of performance is the notion of *gongfu*, of long time physical and spiritual training, the result of which is supposed to come across with perfect and natural ease. Here, the prototype is again found in *Zhuangzi*: the story about Cook Ding cutting up an oxen:

> Cook Ding was cutting up an ox for Lord Wenhui. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee – zip! zoop! He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Jingshou music.
> "Ah, this is marvelous!" said Lord Wenhui. "Imagine skill reaching such heights!"
> Cook Ding laid down his knife and replied, "What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years, I no longer saw the whole ox. And now – now I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.
> "A good cook changes his knife once a year – because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month – because he hacks. I've had this knife of mine for nineteen years

17 Ibid, p. 65.

> and I've cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there's plenty of room – more than enough for the blade to play about it. That's why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone.
> "However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I'm doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until – flop! the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away."
> "Excellent!" said Lord Wenhui. "I have heard the words of Cook Ding and learned how to care for life!"[18]

This story has become one of the most famous ones for capturing the notion of spontaneous creation in the arts, essential to a Daoist aesthetics. What matters is the *Dao* 道, the Way, and this "goes beyond skill." It contains, however, also the important message that such a high, spiritual level of the art can only be achieved after long training. Possibly adding to the popularity of this story is the subtle irony found in Zhuangzi's illustrating here highest artistic ability through the rather vulgar skill of a butcher.

Finally, there are many stories in which painting and calligraphy are related to the performance of martial arts, and even to the preparation to war. In one of the earliest texts on calligraphy, Wang Xizhi's 王羲之 postscript to "Battle Strategy of the Brush" (*Bizhentu* 笔陈图) by his teacher, Lady Wei 卫夫人, we read:

> Paper is the battle array, brush is the knife or spear, ink is the helmet and armor, inkstone and water are the city wall and moat, idea is the commander-in-chief, capability is his assistant, structure is the strategy, the flying stroke indicates good or bad luck, the brush going out and in is equal to the battle order of the army, and the bending or turning strokes indicate killing.[19]

This rather martial rhetoric about such a lofty and cultivated art as calligraphy aims at illustrating one important point: just like in war or a fight, where every move may result in winning or losing, living or dying, in calligraphy also, every stroke counts. With these characteristics, calligraphy is indeed an art of the

18 Watson, p. 50–51.

19 Cited after Gao Jianping, p. 69. *Lidai shufa lunwen xuan* 历代书法论文选, Huang Jian 黄简 (Ed.), Shanghai 1979, I, p. 26.

moment, and concentration and timing – just as in fighting or in a performance – are of paramount importance.

There are stories that relate how famous masters of painting or calligraphy got inspiration for their art when seeing martial arts performed. One such story concerns the legendary Wu Daozi 吴道子, none of whose works survives:

> In the reign of Kaiyuan (713–741), General Bei Wen went to see Wu Daozi on the occasion of his parents' funeral and asked him to draw a few spirits and devils on the walls of Tiangong Temple at Luoyang, as an offering on behalf of the deceased. "I have not painted for a long time," replied Wu Daozi. "If you want to, execute a sword-dance for me. I may be inspired to paint by your brilliant sword-play." Accordingly, the general took off his clothes of mourning and donned his civilian dress. He dashed on horseback back and forth and around; he threw his sword several hundred feet in the air, and it flashed in the sky like lightning. Then the general caught it with a scabbard. The sword sank into it. The thousands of spectators were stunned. Wu Daozi then took up his brush and began to draw figures on the wall. These seemed to take life and became an inspiring sight to all. That was the most satisfying moment in Wu Daozi's life.[20]

A similar story is related in the well-known ballad of Du Fu 杜甫 "On seeing a Pupil of Gongsun Daniang Perform a Sword Dance" 觀公孫大娘弟子舞劍器行. In the preface to this poem Du Fu writes that the famous calligrapher Zhang Xu 张旭, known for his "crazy" grass-script writing, noticed his art having improved after seeing Lady Gongsun 公孫 perform her sword dance (*jianqi* 劍器):

> On the nineteenth day of the tenth month of the second year of Dali (15 November 767), in the residence of Yuan Chi, Lieutenant-Governor of Guizhou, I saw Li Shi er-niang of Linying dance the *jianqi*. Impressed by the brilliance and thrust of her style I asked her whom she had studied under. "I am a pupil of Gongsun," was the reply.
> I remember in the fifth year of Kaiyuan (717) when I was still a little lad seeing Gongsun dance the *jianqi* and the *huntuo* 渾脫 at Yancheng. For purity of technique and self-confident attack she was unrivalled in her day. From the 'royal command performers' and the 'insiders' of the Spring Garden and Pear Garden schools in the palace down to the 'official call' dancers outside, there was no one during the early years of His Sagely Pacific and Divinely Martial Majesty who understood this dance as she did. Where now is that lovely figure in its gorgeous costume? Now even I am an old, white-haired man; and this pupil of hers is well past her prime.
> Having found out about the pupil's antecedents, I now realized that what I had been watching was a faithful reproduction of the great dancer's interpretation. The train of re-

20 Bush and Shih, p. 64.

flections set off by this discovery so moved me that I felt inspired to compose a ballad on the *jianqi*.
Some years ago, Zhang Xu, the great master of the 'grass writing' style of calligraphy, having several times seen Gongsun dance the West River *jianqi* at Yexian, afterwards discovered, to his immense gratification, that his calligraphy had greatly improved. This gives one some idea of the sort of person Gongsun was.[21]

Finally, in the Qing dynasty treatise on calligraphy "The Twin Oars of the Boat of Art" *Yi zhou shuang ji* 艺舟双楫 by Bao Shichen 包世臣 (1775–1855) we can read the following comparison:

> To learn calligraphy is like learning to fight. In fist-fighting, we have techniques (*fa* 法) of body motion, of pacing, of grappling, turning and moving of muscles and bones, stretching of hands and lifting of legs. In all these movements, the tension of the sinews has to be exerted to the utmost, in order for the inner energies to be bundled and exterior energies to be released.[22]

Summing up, we have here not only notions such as the unusual, untrammeled personality, but also physical together with spiritual cultivation leading to perfection in spontaneity, and finally the idea of performing the arts in a martial sprit, as if every movè and stroke would mean winning or losing. All these features indicate a relationship to Daoist or Chan/Zen-Buddhist thinking and aesthetics.

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Let us, in the end, come back to the frame of the symposium and compare the performative aspects found in Chinese art to those that receive so much attention both in postmodern discourse as well as in contemporary art, such as the mentioned action painting or happenings. Particularly regarding the latter, there seems to be an emphasis on the *originality* of the act, i.e., on the originality of the "production." In contrast, the final product in a happening appears rather irrelevant – and even less so the quality of performance. In my view, this priority reflects a dominant trait in the postmodern discourse on performance: freedom, in particular, freedom of choice. For a performance of choice, it does not matter, *what* is chosen, much less *how* it is performed, but rather that one simply has the freedom to act – in what ever way one wants. This peculiarity also seems to be

21 David Hawkes, *A Little Primer of Tu Fu*, Oxford 1967, p. 198–99.
22 *Lidai shufa lunwen xuan*, II, p. 664.

the focus of attention concerning performance in gender discourse: freedom of choice in performance of gender also means being able to dress up as one pleases, or to play any role one likes, regardless of whether it is played well or not. Thus life here is, indeed, a stage, but what is being performed has more a carnivalesque quality. Traditionally, a masquerade – at a certain period of the year, at least in the catholic regions – was meant to bring release from the rather strict role-playing on the stage of life. This now seems to have been extended not only to the whole year round, but to the whole life. The message appears to be: life is not just a stage, life is a carnival.

In comparison, the performative elements in the Chinese artistic tradition emphasize a different aspect: the *way* things are performed. There is the element of spontaneity, but it appears to be tied to the notion of physical and spiritual cultivation, aiming at perfection (*gongfu*) in a performance in which every stroke decides about winning and losing. This is not a reflection of a freedom of choice but of training and cultivation.[23]

In conclusion, the Chinese experience and the respective notion of performance might not be of much significance in the present postmodern discourse of performance. But a look at it might at least enlighten us about the relativity of these dominant concepts emerging presently from our cultural hemisphere. If, in the modern Western understanding, the first one may grant us release, that is, the freedom of a carnivalesque "anything goes," the other, in the Chinese tradition, might give us an idea of perfection in spontaneity (or is that "spontaneity in perfection"?) – that is, a perfection which comes across with a natural ease. When we, finally, take into consideration the notion of the contemporary British composer Cornelius Cardew who has stated "simplicity must contain the memory of how hard it was to achieve,"[24] then we might get an inkling of the intricate relationship of cultivation, perfection and simplicity in the performing arts.

23 Yet, as mentioned above with reference to classical Western music, this aspect is certainly not unknown in our own cultural tradition.

24 Cornelius Cardew, "Toward an Ethic of Improvisation," in *Treatise Handbook* (New York: Edition Peters, 1971), p. xx.