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—Contemporary Art Concept of New Digital
Works by LiQin Tan

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Artist LiQin Tan will hold a “Digital Five Elements Art” exhibition at the Da Vinci Art Alliance in Philadelphia this month. Having studied fine arts in Hunan Normal University, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Concordia University in Canada and *Isn’t the Sheridan College also very important? etc., LiQin Tan is now a professor of the State University of New Jersey, and head of animation at the Fine Arts Department. In recent years, Tan has brought forth a lot of new digital artworks, which have attracted wide attention, having solo exhibitions in USA, Canada, UK, Australia, Turkey and China this year and next year. However, while people are attending to his digital technology, my concern is on his concepts, for digital art is a new phenomenon of contemporary art whose mainstream is concept.

I, Concept of Representation

In the last ten years new media arts, especially digital art, surpassed all other arts in the contemporary art field. People usually consider digital art as a kind of technology in new media art. For artists, it is about adopting current high technology, especially computer simulation and information technology, to create artwork. For critics and theorists, however, things are not so simple. New media art actually involves concept issues of contemporary art as well. For example, digital art not only challenges, but also overthrows the existing art concepts. These concepts include the essential ones of representation and human subjectivity.

Previous digital artworks of LiQin Tan present human figures. The “Digital and Primitive” series, which take the aboriginal culture of American Indian as the subject matter, is such an example. These works are easy to understand and accept due to the representational features of the figures. However, the new artworks of LiQin Tan changed the previous appearance; the identifiable human figures have disappeared, and have been replaced by unidentifiable structures, such as stubs,

旅美華裔藝術家譚力勤，本月在費城的“達芬奇協會”舉辦“數碼五行藝術”展。譚力勤原在湖南師範大學、中央美術學院、加拿大康科迪亞大學等校學習藝術，現為美國新澤西州立大學教授，是該校美術系數碼藝術教研室的負責人。最近幾年譚力勤的數碼藝術不斷翻新，引起了人們的注意，而今年他在美國、加拿大、英國、澳洲、土耳其和中國也都有個展。不過，當人們關注他的技術問題時，我卻關注其觀念問題，因為數碼藝術是當代藝術的新現象，而當代藝術的主流則是觀念的。

一 “再現”的觀念

最近十年的新媒體藝術，尤其是數碼藝術，在當代藝術中一枝獨秀。人們通常認為，數碼藝術涉及的是新媒體藝術中的技術方面。對藝術家來說，這就是如何採用當代高科技，特別是採用電腦模擬和信息技術的現成手段，來制作藝術作品。但是，對於批評家和理論家來說，事情并非這樣簡單，新媒體藝術實際上還涉及當代藝術的觀念問題。例如，數碼藝術是對我們既有藝術概念的挑戰甚至顛覆，包括再現和人的主體性之類根本概念。

譚力勤先前的數碼藝術作品，呈現的是人物形象，例如他以北美印地安人的土著文化為題材的“數碼與原始”系列作品。由於人物的具象性特徵，這些作品易于理解和接受。但是，譚力勤後來的新作品，卻一改過去的外觀，易于辨認的人物形象消失了，代之以不易辨認的構形，而僅僅看似樹樁、枝幹、果實、菌類、石塊等等。這些相當抽象的構形，幾乎是一種純粹的形式，而不是客觀世界的再現。譚力勤數碼作品的此種變化，使我們不得不考察當代藝術關於再現的問題。

branches, fruits, fungi and stones, etc. These fairly abstract structures are almost pure forms rather than representations of the objective world. Such a change in Tan's digital artworks forces us to review contemporary art on the matter of representation.

In the history of western aesthetics, Aristotle's simulation theory is the footstone of art representation theory. Yet Plato once stated that the representation of art was not true. Taking bed as an example, Plato pointed out three hierarchies of representation: idea, sensibility and art. The idea of bed exists in the first hierarchy, namely the reason why the bed becomes bed and the principle. Bed in the second hierarchy is the one made by a carpenter in accordance with the idea of a bed, that is, according to his understanding of the idea and its particular purposes; so, it is perceptual, incomplete, biased and unreal. The third one is the painter's bed, an imitation of the carpenter's bed, which is restricted by visual angle and other factors, thus it represents only part of the outline of the bed, and is even more unreal for this reason. In this way, the painter's bed is the imitation of imitation, shadow of shadow, which is thrice removed from the truth. Plato's logic denied the reality of representation and considered art incapable of representing the reality of truth.

Nonetheless, the history of western fine art from High Renaissance to the 20th century is a history that tries to reflect the objective world. Although the reliability and reality of representation often face Platonic puzzles, while the purpose of artistic representation is simulation, the capability of representation and simulation have become the essential criteria for judging the level of artists, which the Europeans regard as valid everywhere. Even theorists like Levi-Strauss, when talking about the representation of Nicholas Poussin's paintings, would take the classical allusion of China "adding the touch that brings a work of art to life", to explain the reflection level and merits of Nicholas Poussin's paintings.

In this way, from ancient Greece to Gombrich in the 20th century, artists and theorists followed the doctrine of Aristotle in artistic creation and explanation on one hand, while arguing ceaselessly about Plato on the other. Even in the peak of abstract art in mid 20th century, people still contended that art represented an abstract image. At the end of the 20th century, Michel Foucault wrote a book *This is Not a Pipe*, which discussed the representation of paintings by surrealist artist Magritte, thus the age-old debate became a new concept problem in the era of deconstruction and post-modernism.

II Future of Representation

Comprehending digital images of LiQin Tan from an analytical viewpoint, I see the mental imagery of the

在西方美學史上，亞力士多德關於模仿的理論，是藝術再現論的基石。但是柏拉圖卻說過，藝術的再現並不真實。柏拉圖以床為例，給我們指出了再現的三個層次：理式、感性和藝術的層次。在第一個層次上存在着關於床的理式，也就是床之所以為床的道理和原則。第二個層次上的床，是木匠根據床的理式而制作的床，是木匠依自己對這理式的理解和自己的特別目的而制作的，因而是感性的、不全面的、偏頗的、不真實的。第三個層次上的床，是畫家根據木匠的床而繪制的，受到畫家之視角等因素的限制，祇再現了床之外形的某一方面，因而更不真實。於是，畫家的床是摹本的摹本、影子的影子，與真理隔著三層。柏拉圖的邏輯，否定了再現的真實性，認為藝術不可能再現本質的真實。

儘管如此，自文藝復興到二十世紀，西方美術的歷史，卻是一個力圖再現客觀世界的歷史。雖然再現的可靠性和真實性一再受到柏拉圖式的困擾，但藝術再現的目的就是仿真，而再現與仿真的能力，也成為判斷藝術家水平的根本標準。歐洲人認為這是放之四海而皆準的標準，就連列維·斯特勞斯這樣的大理論家，在談到普桑之繪畫的再現問題時，也舉出中國“畫龍點睛”的典故，來說明再現的水平 and 功力。

這樣，自古希臘到二十世紀的貢布裏希，藝術家和理論家們一方面遵從亞力士多德的教義進行創作和闡釋，一方面又不斷地爭論着柏拉圖的問題。即使在二十世紀中期抽象藝術達于鼎盛之時，人們還爭論說，藝術再現的是被抽象化了的物象。到二十世紀後期，福科寫了一本小冊子，《這不是一紙烟鬥》，討論超現實主義畫家馬格利特繪畫中的再現問題，使這場古老的爭論，成為解構主義和後現代時期新的觀念問題。

二、“再現”的未來

用分析的眼光解讀譚力勤的數碼圖像，我看見的不是樹樁、枝幹、果實、菌類、石塊等原始森林的局部摹寫，而是藝術家的心象，譚力勤說這是關於禪和五行的心象。禪是看不見的，譚力勤寓禪于金木水火土五行之中，賦予禪各種寫實的外觀，但其作品卻又不是對某一具體物象的再現。也就是說，藝術家不用木匠的床，他心中祇有一個關於禪的理式。

譚力勤的數碼藝術所涉及的再現觀念具有挑戰性。在這個問題上，今日

artist instead of a partial depiction of stubs, branches, fruits, fungi, and stones, etc. in the primitive forest. LiQin Tan states that it is the mental imagery about meditation and five elements. He implies the invisible meditation in the five elements of metal, wood, water, fire and earth, and puts it in various realistic visual appearances. Yet his works of art are not the representation of certain specific objects. In other words, the artist has his own idea about meditation without using the carpenter's bed.

The concept of representation in LiQin Tan's digital art is challenging. The technical simulation today opens a brand new world for us on this issue and threatens to overthrow the existing theories. The theorist cannot help but ask again: Is this art representation or not? What does art represent? How does art represent? In summary, what kind of representation will there be in the future?

American Chinese scholar Rey Chow believes that in the information and high-tech age, imitation of the objective targets become less and less important for representation, while simulacrum becomes more and more important. It means that representation in the future needs no object to simulate just as painters do not need a model for their sketches. Here I ask again: whether future representation needs not a carpenter's bed but Plato's idea or neither? In order to research this issue, I'll start with "simulacrum".

The original meaning of simulacrum is not sophisticated. It simply means representation or emulation in Latin and French. However, in the information age today and in the context of contemporary art, simulacrum in English has varied greatly from its original meaning. When "simulacrum" emerged in the technical field of the 21st century, it also meant representation and emulation at the very beginning. For instance, the simulator reproduces the real conditions of flight operations in a cabin screen for training. Though the Trueman TV Show today attracts the audience with a "real portrait", what we see are digitally transmitted simulated images instead of real people whom you may touch and talk with. Even in Internet video chat, the voices of the two people are simulated sound converted digitally. Whether in a transmission path or terminal, we neither get a carpenter's bed nor Plato's idea. Simulacrum is then not in its original state and representation becomes virtuality as well.

Virtual image has a realistic appearance, but it doesn't have any model as its original and it is hard to say whether it possesses Plato's idea. In the digital information age, both the city and the global village are virtual existences in nature. As for virtuality in real politics, the Western World provides China with examples of democracy and market economy, while China replies: "Feeling

的技術模擬為我們打開了一片全新的大地，使既有的理論面臨了顛覆的危險，理論家們不得不從新發問：藝術還是不是再現？藝術再現什麼？藝術怎樣再現？這些可以歸結為一個問題：未來的再現是什麼樣的再現？

美國華裔學者趙睿（譯音）認為，在信息和高科技時代，對於再現來說，模仿客觀對象將變得越來越不重要，而模擬卻會越來越重要。也就是說，未來的再現，並不需要被模仿的對象，就象畫家並不需要模特來寫生。在此，我要追問的是：未來的再現，是不需要木匠的床，但仍需要柏拉圖的理式，還是二者都不需要？為了探討這個問題，我要從“模擬”說起。

模擬（simulacrum）一詞的本意並不複雜，在拉丁語和法語中，意思就是再現或仿真。但是在我們今天的信息時代，在當代藝術的時下語境中，英語裏的“模擬”，已與本意相去甚遠。當“模擬”一詞出現在二十世紀的技術領域時，剛開始也指再現和仿真，例如，飛行模擬器（simulator）就是要用座艙屏幕來再現飛行操

作的真實情形，以作訓練之用。可是今天電視屏幕上的真人秀，雖以“寫真”為招徠，但我們看見的，卻不是可以觸摸、可以與之對話的真人，而是數碼傳輸的模擬圖形。即便是在互聯網的視頻聊天中，二人的聲音，也是經過數碼轉換的模擬聲音。無論是在傳輸路徑上還是在終端，我們都既未獲得木匠的床，更未獲得柏拉圖的理式，這時的模擬，已沒有“原型”（original），再現也成為一種“虛擬”之象（virtuality）。

虛擬的形像雖有一個寫實的外觀，但沒有模特作原型，也很難說有沒有柏拉圖的理式。在數碼信息時代，無論是一座城市，還是實現了全球化的地球村，其實都會是一個虛擬的存在。說到現實政治中的虛擬，西方世界為中國提供了民主和市場經濟的樣板，但中國卻回答說摸石頭過河，祇要捉得住老鼠就是好貓。其實西方世界自身，也沒有樣板，不管是柏拉圖的理式還是木匠的床，一概沒有，西方同樣是摸石頭過河去捉老鼠。

在這個問題上，今日美國的文化理論家愛德華·索哈（Edward Soja）有精辟論述。他首先挑戰法國後現代主義主帥鮑德里亞關於“超級現實”（hyperreality）的概念，批評鮑德里亞的“超級現實”是單一性的。索哈指出，信息和高

stones while crossing a river”, “A cat that can catch rats is a good cat.” As a matter of fact, there is no such template in the Western World itself. There is neither Plato’s idea nor the carpenter’s bed. The Western World also feels stones while crossing a river to catch rats.

Edward Soja, a present-day American cultural theorist, comments incisively on the issue. He first challenges the concept of hyperreality given by Baudrillard, the leader of French postmodernism, and criticizes the singularity of Baudrillard’s hyperreality. Soja points out that there are two sides of reality and virtuality in advanced western cities of information and the high-tech age. He calls these cities postmetropolis, e.g. Los Angeles. He calls the citizens living in postmetropolis Simcitizen”, the municipal administration Simgovernment, and administrative policies Simpolitics. Finally, he directly calls the United States SimAmerica. Soja concludes that in the United States, or SimAmerica, all Simcitizens must be Simcontrolled by the Simgovernment. As a result, human nature disappears. In my point of view, Soja probably implies: Doesn’t technology challenge democratic and free American lifestyle and deprive supreme human rights?

If the “postmetropolis” described by Soja is the horrible future displayed in Hollywood science fiction movies, like the futuristic story in the movie “Artificial Intelligence”, the abstract forest created by LiQin Tan will then be a Utopia on the contrary. LiQin Tan has drawn cartoons for the Walt Disney Company, and Disney’s tenet is to depict a beautiful Utopian world. Perhaps, it offers us a conceptual footnote concerning history and culture in understanding LiQin Tan’s digital art.

III. “Cyborg” and Meditation

Donna Haraway, a famous American feminist theorist, issued a manifesto on future Cyborgs. Her words are critical, crazy and witty. According to Haraway’s definition, all the people in the future will be Cyborgs, that is, hybrids of machines and animals, and creatures of social development as well as of fiction. Haraway believes that social reality is in essence social relation, the most important political framework which is actually a virtual one in the developing and changing world. Thus, social development will integrate with virtuality and machines will integrate with animals. In fact, Cyborg debuted many years ago in the United States. As early as the mid 1980s, the US Army has begun to research and develop C3I, a command-control-communication-intelligence system with no human appearance but considerable artificial intelligence. Later, in the new version of the Hollywood movie Star Wars, robot soldiers with wolf heads and human bodies emerge, which can be regarded as Cyborgs with a human appearance. It is said that these intelligent

科技時代發達的四方城市有實在和虛幻兩個方面，他稱這樣的城市為“後大都會”（postmetropolis），例如洛杉磯。生活在後大都會的市民，他稱為“模擬市民”（Simcitizens），市政管理是“模擬市政”（Simgovernment），管理方針是“模擬政治”（Simpolitics）。最後他干脆稱美國為“模擬國家”（SimAmerica）。索哈的結論是，在美國這樣一個模擬國家裏，所有的模擬公民都必須接受模擬政府的模擬管制，結果，人之所以為人的本質屬性便喪失了。在我看來，索哈可能是想暗示，在這模擬的國家裏，技術莫非不是對民主、自由的美國生活方式的挑戰、莫非不是對至高無上的人權的剝奪？

如果說索哈描繪的“後大都會”城市，是好萊塢科幻電影所展示的可怕未來，例如電影“人工智能”所講的未來故事，那麼譚力勤創造的抽象森林，便是一個相反的烏托邦。譚力勤曾為美國迪斯尼電影公司繪制動畫片，而迪斯尼的宗旨是描繪美好的烏托邦世界。也許，這可以為我們理解譚力勤的數碼藝術，提供一個涉及歷史和文化的觀念性注腳。

三. “模擬人”與禪

美國著名女性主義理論家當娜·哈娜薇，發表過一篇關於未來之“模擬人”（Cyborg）的宣言，其言辭富於批判精神，同時又瘋狂而調侃。按照哈娜薇的定義，未來世界的人，都會是模擬人，這是機器與動物的組合，既是社會發展的產物，也是虛構的產物。哈娜薇認為，社會現實就是社會關係，這是最重要的政治構架，但在發展變化着的世界上，這個構架是虛擬的。於是，社會發展與虛構就會合一，機器與動物也會合一。實際上，模擬人在美國已經出現。早在八十年代中期，美國軍方就開始研發一種代號為C3I的指揮、控制、通訊及情報系統（command-control-communication-intelligence），這是一個不具備人的外形，但具有相當人工智能的系統。後來，在新版好萊塢電影《星球大戰》中，一種狼頭人身的機器士兵出現了，這可以被看成是具有人形的模擬人，據說這種智能機器人將會是美國的未來士兵。

正如世上沒有永動機，機器需要人的設計、制作、操縱和維護，人工智能的產物也出自人的設計和操作。然而，哈娜薇所說的模擬人是一種越界的造物，它越過了機器與人的界綫，越過了實用技術與科學幻想的界綫，以及大腦與身體的界綫。在長篇大論的《模擬人宣言》的最

robots will be future soldiers in the United States.

Just as there is no perpetual motion machine in the world, machines need to be designed, manufactured, operated and maintained by people, as well as the products of artificial intelligence. However, the Cyborg that Haraway mentions is a transcendental creature, which exceeds the limitation of robot and human, limitations of practical technology and science fiction, as well as limitations of the brain and body. At the end of the harangue of *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway describes the nature of the Cyborg: If our bodies in reality incarnate our power and status, so does the body of the Cyborg. That is to say, Haraway's post-metropolitan simulation society is in fact the reflection of our real society. Though it emerges with a high-tech appearance of the information age, it still has all the problems of our real society. Therefore, on the one hand, fiction and fantasy of information technology cannot provide us shelter; on the other hand, human nature is unchangeable, even the Cyborg's body is still the embodiment of power, status and social nature.

On the basis of the above realization, Tan's meditation and the five elements in his new digital works now become easier for us to understand. As what has been said previously, LiQin Tan's latest works adopt abstract structures with realistic appearances in place of the human figures in his previous works. Meditation is a human understanding of themselves and the outside world. Since one end of meditation involves the outside world, it can be embodied or implied by the five elements as well. Meditation is a wordless religion. Since artists express meditation in forms of metal, wood, water, fire and earth, it is naturally unnecessary to endure meditation with human appearance. Although humankind is concerned with the other end of meditation, in a metaphysical sense, they can also be embodied by artists in formless ways. Thus, LiQin Tan reproduces part of the primitive forest by using digital abstract modes. He uses configurations implying meditation of stubs, branches, fruits, fungi, stones, etc. as human psychological images. If the primitive forest is Tan's representation of "Simcity", these configurations then are his representation of "Simcitizens".

Obviously, the forest in the representation of LiQin Tan's digital artworks is a "Simcountry" contrary to Soja's, while the people in the forest are "Cyborgs" contrary to Haraway's. LiQin Tan is a social participant, yet in the depth of his heart, he is a hermit like the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove in ancient China. In my eyes, his "Digital Five Elements Art" serial works reflect himself, in whose heart the idea of art already exists.

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後，哈娜薇寫到了模擬人的本質：如果說我們現世中人的身體，是權力與身份的體現，那麼模擬人也不例外，其身體也是權力與身份的體現。這就是說，索哈那種後大都會的模擬社會，實為我們現實社會的寫照，它雖以信息時代之高科技的面目出現，但也存在着我們現實社會的所有問題。因此，一方面信息技術的虛構與幻想，並不能給我們提供一個避難所，另一方面，人的本質不可改變，連模擬人的身體，也仍是權力與身份的顯現，也具有社會的屬性。

有了這樣的認識，再看譚力勤的數碼新作，我們對他的禪和五行便易于理解了。如前所述，譚力勤先前的作品都具有人的外形，而最近的新作卻代之以貌似寫實的抽象構型。禪是人對自身和外界的認識，既然禪在其一端涉及到外界，它就可以被五行的元素所體現或暗示。禪是無言之教，藝術家用金木水火土來承載禪，當然不必給禪以人的外形。但是，禪的另一端涉及到人，于是在形而上的意義上，藝術家便可以用無形的方式來再現人。于是，譚力勤用數碼抽象的方式，再現了原始森林的局部，他以樹樁、枝幹、果實、菌類、石塊等隱含禪意的構形，來作為人的心靈圖象。這個原始森林，如果是譚力勤所再現的“模擬城市”，那麼這些構形便是他再現的“模擬市民”。

顯然，譚力勤的數碼藝術作品所再現的森林，是一個與索哈相反的“模擬國家”，而森林裏的人，則是與哈娜薇相反的“模擬人”。譚力勤是一個入世者，但在內心深處，卻又是竹林七賢式的出世者。在我眼中，他的“數碼五行藝術”系列作品，再現的是他自己，他心中自有藝術的理式。

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1. Please refer to *History of Western Aesthetics*. V1, by Zhu Guangqian, Beijing, People's Literature Publishing House, 1979, p44.
2. Levi-Strauss *Regarder, écouter et lire*, Beijing: San Lian Press, 1996, p 23
3. Rey Chow, "Gender and Representation" in *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*. Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka, eds. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2001. p54.
4. Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p323.
5. *Ibid.*, p.47.; 7. *Ibid.*, p. 315.
6. Donna Haraway. "A Cyborg Manifesto" in *The Cybercultures Reader*. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, eds. New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 291.