The Virtual World and Its Cultural Origin

虚拟世界与文化溯源:
浅说旅美画家谭力勤的数位艺术

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When contemporary art entered the 21st century, artists, critics and art historians were anxious to explore the future direction of the development in art. However, on the one hand, contemporary new media art is gradually approaching the cultural mainstream, which shows a gesture to substitute traditional paintings and conceptual art. On the other hand, it presents a virtual world, in which we cannot see the real substantial existence of art, let alone explore the future direction of the development in art.

This may be because new media artists pay too much attention to the word "new" in new media art and place their art into a self-made vacuum so that they pursue their own trend and pretend to be cynical, consequently denying their historical origin. Many contemporary new media art belong to this kind of duckweed without root that neither looks behind nor looks ahead.

In February 2004, computer animation Professor LiQin Tan's exhibition: Digital Finite & Primitive Infinity: Animation Permeates American Rawhides was held at the Stedman Art Gallery of Rutgers University near Philadelphia, USA. His exhibition was a refreshing experience. What the artist was concerned with most was not the self-made vacuum of new media art but its cultural origin. In the virtual world of digital art and primitive motif, through the origin of culture, the artist gives us a chance to look forward to the comings and goings of contemporary new media art, as well as the thinking and acting of the explorative artist during the rise of contemporary art .

Art and human civilization were born simultaneously, and prehistoric cave paintings are the earliest forms of art. Painting, sculpture and architecture have been the three basic forms of art since ancient Egypt and ancient Greece. However, the traditional concept of art was shaken during the mid 20th century. Since the appearance of pop art and minimal art, the boundary between easel painting and sculpture has been breached, new forms of art emerged as was required by the times, and installation art entered the world of art. Following that was the emergence of performance art, which enormously enriched the concept of art. In the 1980s, video art as a new form of art also joined in, which not only made "idea" the mainstream of contemporary art, but also predicted the birth of digital art. As a product of high technology, digital art has emerged since the mid 1990s.

Although the concept of it can be dated back to more than half a century ago at the birth of computer, it was only in recent years that digital art has become an independent new art form.

Regarding the aforementioned background of development and evolution art, scholars attempted to define digital art from the aspect of taxonomy. Christiane Paul, the authority in digital art research in America, divided digital art into two categories: first, performing art activities by digital means, e.g. processing of pictures with digital techniques to achieve surrealistic effects; second, taking the digital means itself as the carrier of art, making it an independent type of art.

Such classification may conform to the reality in the primary stage of the development of digital art, e.g. as artists "tamper" with pictures in Photoshop. Now that digital art is developing at a fast speed, this dichotomy of digital art has become a little far-fetched. When digital technology must be used as a tool in practical digital art composition, the works created thus are independent rather than dependent to paintings or sculptures. Transcending the taxonomic definition, LiQin Tan's exhibits of digital art are, to a great extent, original and independent.

Among the digital works of LiQin Tan, Digital Queen impressed me the most. Digital Queen is an example of original and independent works that transcend the taxonomic definition, in which, firstly, digital technology is adopted as a basic means to create the images of a virtual queen and the head of an ox, symbolizing primitive royalty. The two images are then combined together by digital editing techniques with the ancient cave painting as its background, and finally, the extraordinary highlight of the work is printed on real animal hide and decorated with a hand-made wooden framework. Works thus created may fall into the first category of digital art as defined by Christiane Paul, i.e. an animal hide painting that merely adopts digital art as a modeling tool and animal hide as the carrier.

Nevertheless, it is not a simple traditional easel painting. The animal hides and the virtual image used, which reveal the theme of the exhibition Digital and Primitive themselves, make this digital work an independent existence. To be specific, the painting is not a work adopting digital technology merely to "tamper" with the images for the purpose of achieving surrealistic effects, but a work "creating" images, "creating" scenes and conditions, and "creating" eventually, an integrated virtual world by utilizing digital techniques. LiQin Tan's works create a completely new reality from scratch rather than "tamper" with existing photographs or paintings. In this sense, LiQin Tan's works seem to belong to the second category of digital art as defined by Christiane Paul, i.e. an independent form of art.

However, it is not sufficient to simply define Digital Queen according to the aforesaid dichotomy. It seems meaningless to continue with the dichotomy of digital art and give a taxonomic definition of LiQin Tan's works. The reason why I intend to support the works of LiQin Tan against the dichotomy of digital art is that such a discussion helps us understand LiQin Tan's specific inventions and his artistic pursuits

LiQin Tan used to research and study traditional Chinese ink paintings with excellent achievement. In the early 1980s, he entered the field of art theory as an editor of the art press and had some influence in the peer group of Chinese art circles through his critiques. In the mid 1980s, LiQin Tan actively participated in "85 New Art Trends", explored the new world and was quite successful in theoretical writing and his painting practice. In his work Origin, three large paintbrushes and six ink blocks are placed under the hanging sun, which seems to indicate his will to seek the origin of the world and life. From our current point of view, this work is conceptual, and integrates painting and installation together in media and methods. In the late 1980s, LiQin Tan went to Canada to further research and study art theory, while his ink paintings tended towards conceptual art, emphasizing the research of cultural relations between China and the West as well as between ancient and modern times.

Presently, LiQin Tan's digital art adheres to his consistent exploration and tends to research the relation between prehistoric and contemporary cultures. In the early 1990s, LiQin Tan noticed that the Indian culture of the American aborigines might have had a connection with the Chinese Tibetan culture. For example, there are marvelous similarities in architecture, dress, adornment and handiwork. Therefore, he began to research the early American culture in North, Central and South America. On the basis of geological, archaeological and anthropological conclusions, tens of thousands of years ago when the Bering Strait between northeast Asia and northwest America was frozen, hunting tribes from the Mongolian Plateau in Asia entered North America, and then gradually migrated southward to the entire territory of America. There are geographical links between ancient tribes in the Mongolian and Qinghai-Tibet Plateaus, which might answer questions about the connection between early American culture and Tibetan culture.

当代艺术进入二十一世纪，艺术家、批评家和美术史学家们都产生了一种焦虑，想要窥探未来艺术的发展方向。然而，当下的新媒体艺术，一方面逐渐逼近文化主流，对架上绘画和观念艺术显出一派取而代之、舍我其谁的姿态，另一方面却给我们展现了一个虚拟的世界，在这个世界里，我们看不见艺术那实实在在的物质存在，更谈不上窥探未来艺术的发展方向。

之所以如此，也许是新媒体艺术家们太专注于新媒体的"新"字，将自己的艺术放到了一个自造的真空中，从而为一意追赶时尚和故作愤世嫉俗，而否认自己的历史渊源。当今的新媒体艺术，有不少都是这种既不能"后顾"，也无法"瞻前"的无根浮萍。

今年二月在美国费城附近的罗格斯大学斯代德曼画廊（StedmanGallery），举办了旅美华裔画家、罗格斯大学电脑美术教授谭力勤的数位艺术作品展《数位与原始：北美原住民兽皮上的动画艺术》。这个展览让我耳目一新，因为艺术家关注的不是那个自造的真空，而是新媒体艺术的历史和文化渊源。在"数位与原始"的虚拟世界里，艺术家通过文化溯源，让我们有机会瞭望当代新媒体艺术的来龙去脉，也有机会了解这位探索型艺术家在当代艺术大潮中的思考与行动。

艺术与人类文明同时产生，史前时期的洞穴壁画是最早的艺术样式。自古埃及和古希腊以来，绘画、雕塑和建筑，一直是艺术的三大基本样式。但是，艺术的传统概念在二十世纪中期发生了动摇，由於波普艺术与极少主义的出现，架上绘画与雕塑之间的界限被打破，新的艺术样式应运而生，装置艺术登场。接着，表演与行为艺术也紧步其後，艺术的概念大为丰富。到二十世纪八十年代，视像艺术（video art）作为新的样式也加入进来，使"观念"成为当代艺术的主流，并预示了数位艺术的降生。作为高科技的产物，数位艺术起自九十年代中期，虽然其概念可以追溯到大半个世纪前计算机的诞生，但数位艺术得以成为一个自主的艺术新样式，却是近年的事。

由於艺术发展的上述背景，学者们习惯性地企图为数位艺术进行分类学上的定位。美国最权威的数位艺术研究者克里丝汀.保罗（ChristianePaul），将数位艺术分为两类，一是以数位方式为工具进行艺术活动，例如用数位技术处理画面，以求超现实的效果。二是以数位方式本身作为艺术的载体，使其成为一种独立的艺术种类。

也许在数位艺术发展的初始阶段，上述画分符合实际，例如艺术家们用Photoshop作为工具来"篡改"画面。可是数位艺术发展极快，现在，这样的二分法难免有牵强之嫌，因为在数位艺术的创作实践中，数位技术必须作为工具来使用，但就此产生的作品，却又并非绘画或雕塑的附庸，而是自成一体。谭力勤展出的数位艺术，便超越了分类学的定位，在相当程度上具有独创性和自主性。

在谭力勤的数位作品中，给我印象最深的是《数位女皇》，这件作品是超越上述二分法而具有独创性与自主性的例子。首先，作品用数位技术作为基本造型手段，塑造了一位虚拟的女皇形象，以及一个象徵原始王权的牛头形象。然後，作品仍用数位编辑技术，将这两个形象组合起来，并加上原始洞穴壁画的背景。末了，一个意外的精彩之处，是将这件作品印制到真正的兽皮上，并加以手工制作的木质外框。但是，如果谭力勤的作品仅仅如此，那么可能属於克里丝汀所画分的第一类数位艺术，也就是以数位技术为造型工具，以兽皮为载体的皮面绘画。

不过，这件作品不是简单的传统式架上绘画。兽皮画布和虚拟形象，本身就揭示了展览的"数位与原始"的主题，从而使这一数位作品成为自主的存在。具体地说，这件作品不是用数位技术作为手段来"篡改"图像，以求某种超现实的效果。相反，这件作品是以数位技术来"创造"形象、"创造"情景和环境，并最终"创造"一个完整的虚拟世界。谭力勤的作品，没有依赖既存的摄影或绘画来作为"篡改"的对象或依据，而是白手起家，"创造"了一个全新的现实。在这个意义上，谭力勤的作品似乎应该算是克里丝汀所画分的第二类数位艺术，也就是一种独立的艺术样式。

然而，这件作品不是用上述二分法就可以简单定位的。假如我们纠缠於数位艺术的二分法，并为谭力勤的作品进行分类学上的定位，可能毫无意义。我之所以要支持谭力勤的作品而不是用数位技术作为手段来的二分法进行一点争论，是因为这样的争辩有利於我们理解谭力勤的具体创作，有利於理解他的艺术追求。

谭力勤原本研习传统的中国水墨画，其笔墨技艺也颇有成就。在八十年代初，他以美术出版社编辑的身份，进入艺术理论界，并以自己的批评写作，而在中国艺术界的同人中产生了影响。到八十年代中期，谭力勤积极投身於"85新潮"运动，在理论写作与绘画实践两方面，探索新的世界，并取得了相当成就。他的作品《宗》在高悬的太阳下，摆放了三支大号画

LiQin Tan's digital art explores the question instead of answering it, and thus explores more general cultural connections between East and West as well as between ancient and modern times. As part of high technology in the 21st century, digital technology is the symbol of contemporary culture, while themes of early American civilization and media materials such as animal hides are the symbols of ancient culture. LiQin Tan amazingly tightens the animal hides in wooden frames with ropes and iron hooks, thus symbolically linking high–tech with a centuries-old civilization. He expresses his idea, theme and exploration in this way, instead of using digital technology only as a means or merely creating digital works. On this basis, I say that LiQin Tan's works transcend the dichotomy of Christiane Paul. I support the classification and positioning of digital art in order to reveal LiQin Tan's idea and theme, which is to affirm the historical and cultural origin of current new media art, and research this origin in the virtual world.

Another digital exhibit of LiQin Tan, Sun and Horses, boosts forward his conceptual exploration. If the image of the horses is rather concrete as a symbol of the civilization of early Americans, then the image of the sun as a consistent theme of artists, not only suggests the ancient sun worship, but also hints at the origin of life and art today. The sun in the work is a fiction of the artist, which not only implies the tomahawk, but also the early American evocative net as well as their sundial and calendar. In ancient culture, primitive religion and natural science are not separable. The sun of LiQin Tan suggests the origin of life of human's high-tech today, while the galloping horses under the sun are the miniaturization of humanity's pursuit for truth for thousands of years. In another digital work entitled Digital Malik, the artist simply integrated the image of the Malik and the sun in one, to express his understanding of the relation between ancient and present culture.

For us today, ancient culture is mysterious, as we cannot fathom the mystery of ancient culture, especially of ancient religion from the aspect of our present culture and science. Although, with the assistance of high technology today, we can seek after the thoughts of the aborigines, their mentality is still unattainable, and we are still unable to think the way they used to. This is the reason why aboriginal primitive culture and its outcome bear such great charm to us. Among all of LiQin Tan's exhibits, Digital Gemstone is my favorite. According to anthropological surveys, each early American tribe has a gemstone symbolizing its royalty, which has been largely exaggerated in many horse operas of Hollywood, and well developed into legends one after another. As these stories indicate, the gemstones in the early American tribes have boundless magic which have the ability to summon wind and rain as well as defend against foreign enemies. The owner of such a gemstone would be the world ruler. In Digital Gemstone, LiQin Tan created the virtual gemstone of a early American tribe. This work is ironic. As in the late 20th century, the great leaps in computer technology have created an illusive modern myth, in which digital technology seems to be omnipotent, with boundless magic, just like an early American gemstone. The irony of LiQin Tan is a cycling paradox presented before us and our era: is it the ancient tribe gemstone which foretold the digital technology today or is it the digital technology today which has created the ancient tribe gemstone?

笔和六碇墨块，似乎要通过艺术来追寻世界和生命的本源。用我们现在的眼光看，这件作品是观念的，而且在媒材和手段上，也将绘画和装置融会贯通了起来。八十年代后期，谭力勤到加拿大进一步研习美术理论，而他的水墨画创作，则走向了观念艺术，注重探讨中国与西方、古代与现代的文化关系。

现在，谭力勤的数位艺术，秉承了他一贯的探索性，在观念方面倾向於研讨史前文化与当代文化的关系。早在九十年代初，谭力勤就注意到美洲原住民的印地安文化同中国的藏族文化可能有联系，例如二者的建筑、服饰、手工制品等，竟有奇妙的相似之处。由此，他开始对北美和中南美洲的印地安文化进行研究根据地质学、考古学和人类学的推断，数万年前，在亚洲东北和美洲西北的白令海峡封冻之时，来自亚洲蒙古高原的游猎部落，便进入了北美，然後渐次南下，进入整个美洲地区。蒙古高原的原始部落，同青藏高原的原始部落，在地理上有所联系。或许，这可以解答印地安文化同藏族文化的关系问题。

谭力勤的艺术，并不是真的要去解答这个问题，而是要探索这个问题，并因此而探索更具有普遍性的东方与西方、上古与现时的文化关系。作为二十一世纪高科技的数位技术，是当代文化的体现，而印地安文明的主题和兽皮等媒材，则是原始文化的象徵。让人惊讶的是，谭力勤用绫索和铁钩，将兽皮紧绷在木框里，从而象徵性地迫使高科技与原始文明相联系。他以这样的方式，来表达自己的观念、主题和探索，而不是仅仅以数位技术为手段，或仅仅制作数位作品。正是在此意义上，我才说谭力勤的作品超越了克里丝汀的二分法。我对数位艺术之分类定位的此种争辩，是为了揭示谭力勤的观念和主题，也即肯定今日新媒体艺术的历史文化渊源，并在虚拟的世界中探讨这一渊源。

谭力勤参展的另一件数位作品《太阳与马》，将他的观念性探索向前推进了一步。如果说马的形象还比较具体，象徵着印地安的原始文明，那么，太阳的形象则是艺术家的一贯主题，他不仅暗示着原始的太阳崇拜，而且提示着我们今天的生命之源和艺术之源。作品中的太阳，是艺术家的虚拟，既指涉了印地安的战鼓，又指涉了印地安的招魂网，还指涉了印地安的日晷和历法。在上古文化中，原始宗教与自然科学是不分的，谭力勤的太阳，暗示了今日人类高科技的生命渊源，而太阳下面的奔马，则是人类数千年来追求真理的缩写。在另一件数位作品《数位酋长》中，艺术家干脆将印地安酋长的形象，同太阳合而为一，以表达自己对古今文化关系的理解。

对我们今天的人来说，原始文化是神秘的，因为我们无法以今日文化和科学的角度，去理解原始文化，特别是原始宗教的神秘性。尽管我们今天有了高科技，可以利用高科技的帮助去探求初民的思维，但是，我们仍然不具备初民的心智，不能象初民那样思考。也正因此，初民的原始文化，以及原始文化的产物，才对我们显示出巨大的魅力。在谭力勤的参展作品中，我很喜欢《数位宝石》。根据人类学的考查，美洲印地安人的每一个部落，都有一颗象徵该部落之王权的宝石。好莱坞的许多西部片，更对部落宝石大肆渲染，衍译出一部神奇故事。根据这些故事，印地安部落的宝石，魔法无边，可以呼风唤雨，可以抵御外敌，谁拥有这样的宝石，谁就可以主宰世界。谭力勤在《数位宝石》中，创造了一个虚拟的印

Which of the two is the true origin of creation? Or is there a true origin of creation on earth? LiQin Tan didn't mean to answer this Sphinx-like question. Only in his work did he weave the boundless magic of the tribe gemstone with the omnipotence of digital technology together in one picture, making them indistinguishable from each other, and throwing the paradox to the viewers of this picture like us. In this way, the artist has shaken off his identity, looking over us from high above, smiling and watching us suffer in this guessing game.

Why are people so interested in primitive civilization in the present high-tech times? On one hand, it's due to human nature as men want to trace the origin of life; on the other hand, we should also realize that yesterday's culture which is gone forever, is full of attractive economic value in today's globalized and commercialized world. For example, British Victorian art in the second half of 19th century was elbowed out of mainstream art by modernism in the early 20th century. As a result, even masterworks of the Victorian era experienced dramatic and abrupt decreases in price. The masterpiece Ophelia (1894) was sold at 700 pounds when it was completed by William Waterhouse (1849-1917). The price of this work dropped to 472 pounds ten years later in 1913. In 1950, it even dropped to 20 pounds. However, along with the passing of modernism fever and coming of post-modernism, old art regained its popularity. Waterhouse's Ophelia bobbed up again. The drawing has changed hands several times, in the five deals in 1969, 1971, 1982, 1993, 2000, the prices were 420 pounds, 3,000 pounds, 75,000 pounds, 419,500 pounds, 1,600,000 pounds separately. Another Waterhouse drawing, Saint Cecilia (1895), even rose to a sky-high price of 6,603,750 pounds, which was equivalent to ten million dollars at the time.

Although only about one hundred years had passed since the Victorian era, the value of artwork has already experienced such dramatic fluctuation. Ancient art with a long history has unapproachable commercial value. At the same time, high-tech nowadays is also a mirror of economic force with digital art as an outstanding one. With so many people scrambling for it in the contemporary art field and art market, digital art as a new form of art has great potential commercial value due to its inseparable connection with movies.

As for LiQin Tan, though the temptation of commercial value of digital art can't be ignored, academic value is a more important concern. The academic value has two sides including the value of art and culture as well as the value of technical development. As an explorive conceptual artist and scholar, LiQin Tan teaches digital art in the Fine Arts Department of Rutgers University, New Jersey. Engaged in teaching and scientific research, LiQin Tan strives to walk the frontier of technical development during his exploration in digital art. The problem of cultural origin discussed in the article, such as the relations between East and West, ancient times and present times, is the value of art and culture that LiQin Tan explored. Actually, LiQin Tan respects the characteristics of digital art; he places technical development in a very important position, though the technical problem of digital art is not discussed here. Finally the article wants to point out that as an artist of Chinese origin, LiQin Tan wishes to show his ability in the inchoate new media art of North America through the two academic values of digital art.　February 2004

地安部落宝石。这件作品是反讽的，因为在二十世纪末期，计算机计术的突飞猛进，制造了一个虚幻的当代神话，似乎数位技术无所不能、法力无边，俨然象一颗印地安宝石。谭力勤的反讽，是向我们，也向我们的时代，提出了一个自我循环的悖谬问题：是原始的部落宝石寓言了今天的数位技术，还是今天的数位技术制造了原始的部落宝石？二者之中，谁是真正的创造本源？这世上究竟有没有真正的创造本源？谭力勤并不想去解答这种类似斯芬克斯似的问题，他只在自己的作品中，将部落宝石的无边法力和数位技术的无边法力，交织在同一幅画面上，使其无法分辨，从而将这个悖论问题，抛给了我们这些看作品的人。这样一来，艺术家就摇身一变，从高空俯视我们，笑看我们的猜谜之苦。

在当今的高科技时代，为什么对上古的原始文明产生了如此兴趣？一方面这当然是天性使然，人们想为自己的生命存在去追根溯源。但是另一方面，我们也应该看到，在全球化、商业化的今天，往日的文化因其一去不返而具有诱人的经济价值。我可以举个例子，十九世纪後半期的英国维多利亚艺术，在二十世纪初被现代主义挤出了艺术主流，结果，连维多利亚时代艺术大师的作品也身价大跌。瓦特豪斯（William Waterhouse, 1849-1917）的名作《奥菲丽亚》（1894），在刚画成时以七百英镑售出。十年後的一九一三年，该画跌到四百七十二英镑，到一九五〇年，竟惨跌至区区二十英镑。然而，当现代主义高潮渐渐过去，後现代主义赫然来临之时，往日艺术重获青睐，瓦特豪斯的《奥菲丽亚》东山再起。此画多次易主，在一九六九、一九七一、一九八二、一九九三和二〇〇〇年的五次交易中，售价分别是四百二十英镑、三千英镑、七万五千英镑、四十一万九千五百英镑、一百六十万英镑。瓦特豪斯的另一件作品《圣.希希丽亚》（1895）更在同时创造了售达六百六十万三千七百五十英镑的天价，高达千万美元。维多利亚时代距今年代久远，其商业价值更让人难望项背。与此同时，今日高科技也是经济力量的反映，数位技术更是高科技中的佼佼者。作为一种新的艺术样式，在今天的艺术界和艺术市场，人们对数位艺术趋之若鹜，因为它同电影结下了不解之缘，其商业价值有巨大潜力。

对谭力勤来说，虽然数位艺术之商业价值的诱惑无视视而不见，但他更看重其学术价值。这学术价值有两个方面，一是艺术文化的价值，再是技术开发的价值。谭力勤是一位探索型的观念艺术家，也是一位学者，他在新泽西州的罗格斯大学美术系教数位艺术。由於任教与科研之故，他对数位艺术的探讨，总是力图走在技术开发的前沿。本文所讨论的文化渊源问题，如东方与西方、上古与现时等关系，是谭力勤所探讨的艺术文化价值。实际上，谭力勤也是一位很看重数位艺术之特点的人，他将技术开发的问题放在相当重要的地位上考虑。不过，数位艺术的技术问题，不是本文所讨论的问题。本文最後想指出的是，作为一位华裔艺术家，谭力勤希望以数位艺术之两方面的学术价值，而在北美刚刚起步的新媒体艺术中，展现自己的能力。

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