

Wandering between Two Extremes

— LiQin Tan’s Art Experience

两极间的游走——谭力勤的艺术历程

Tan has been a representative of the art field since the early 1980s with his continuing art exploration. For him, the choice of perpetual artistic discovery is not only his destiny but also a pragmatic action of art creation. The analysis of Tan’s art experiences highlights many of the important trends and developments between China and the West since the 1980s.

For artists, “Wandering” comprises the relationship between life’s space & art’s liberty, while the “Two Extremes” projects the ephemeral boundaries between which the wandering is bounded by. In Tan’s story, the two extremes reflect the polar identities of Artist & Critic — both of which are roles that he’s adopted in successive juxtaposition during his art career. Works studying primitive societies to those innovating within new media are featured, alongside developments in Eastern and Western cultures.

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Dual Identity: Artist & Critic

In 1984, Tan won a Prize of Excellence at the 6th National Art Exhibition of China. In the following year, his article A Future Conceptual Vision of Chinese Art won a Prize of Excellent Work from the magazine *The Trend of Art Thought*. With these two prizes, Tan suddenly found himself immersed in the art world as both an Artist as well as a Critic.

The conservatism of the 6th National Art Exhibition became an important driving factor behind the “85 New Art Movement” During the seminar held at the exhibition, Tan animadverted on the works and exhibiting patterns of the exhibition. In *A Future Conceptual Vision of Chinese Art*, Tan expressed his desire for future art pursuits. In the two successive experiences he showed one tendency of his mental world: finding

something new in the old world — similar to the spirit of “ ’85 New Art Movement.” From then on he became a representative artist and critic of the “85 New Art Trend.”

Tan was dedicated to the “ ’85 New Art Movement” in two important roles: (1) As one of the founders and an executive editor of the avant-garde art magazine *Painter*, Tan discovered the talented artist Gu Wenda and reported on him with special coverage in *Painter*. This was the first appearance of Gu Wenda’s works in domestic media coverage — a significant contribution made by Tan as a critic. (2) Tan participated in the Zhuha “ ’85 New Art Movement” seminar organized by the *Art Newspaper of China* and Zhuhai Academy of Fine Arts. His installation *Myriad Creatures* was shown in the seminar and attracted attention to him — the artist.

How did Tan think about the hot topic during the contemporary art era: that of “the relationship between the artist and the critic” in 1980s? He clearly expressed his point of view in the articles of *A Scattered Senses Theory* in the book *The Theory of Contemporary Art*, published by the Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House in 1987. He stated: “Artistic commentary is a creation of an aesthetic subject. Only the critics are sensitive to the subject and may become another kind of productive power of artistic creation that directly creates artistic treasures. Their articles themselves not only have cognitive value but also aesthetic value. The critics are art producers. Therefore, it is more accurate to call them art critics than artists.” From his words we know that Tan regarded artistic commentary as a kind of aesthetic creation relating to the subject and critics as commentary artists — those that reveal the nature of the artist. Throughout the article, we can see how Tan regarded “Life-force,” “Intuition,”

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“Sensibility” and “Emotion” as identical to the cultural atmosphere created by Nietzsche philosophy in the 1980s and “Philosophy of Life.” His relatively objective, analytical attitude echoes his accumulated knowledge and his admiration of rational reflection in 1980s. I don’t mean to discuss his philosophy on commentary, but to make clear the call-and-echo of this philosophy at the time and his future development ahead: that is, why Tan becomes a professional artist.

POP Collage with Traditional Symbols

Xiaohua Su (Shu Qun) analyzed and recommended Tan’s work *Myriad Creatures* in *Halfway Pop Hot* (in the *Art* magazine from December 1986). Based on his critique on *Pop Hot in China* influenced by Shenhua Lao, Su positively commented on *Myriad Creatures* by the standard of “Breaking with convention.” In Su’s opinion, “the polar behavior of choosing making materials for his Chinese painting has surpassed writing works of Gu Wenda, but the visual tension of the work is not equal to that of Gu Wenda’s works.” Now we can say Su’s comment is fairly pertinent. In my opinion, the concept of the work exceeds the form. The correspondence of the form to the diagram of Trigrams (Qian, Qun) is too simple, hindering the critical force of the work. But if the work is considered under the art atmosphere in 1980s, it has a sense of inevitability. Under the cultural atmosphere of the time, the sharp tease on the materials of Chinese painting and consequent questioning on traditional culture were certain to bring about severe impacts on traditionalists.

From 1987 to the early 1990s, Tan traveled abroad to expand upon the creative thoughts that he pursued while in China. In April 1990, he exhibited a series of his works Bamboo Culture Series in VAV Gallery of Concordia University, taking bamboo as an edged tool to make an impact on Chinese traditional literati paintings. Among the works, eight bamboo hats of an important work *Heavenly Stem and Earthly Branch* were marked with “Jia, Yi, Bin, Ding (heavenly stem)” and “Zi, Chou, Yin, Mao” (“earthly branch,” full of the feelings of the origin and roughness). The work evidently continued the creative thoughts of *Myriad Creatures* with extensions. The primitive culture and traditional culture were explored and utilized more deeply and intensively. In my opinion, this is his conscious effort to hone in on traditional homeland cultures as well as to further develop former thoughts. Subsequently, he created *Huge Abacus* and mounted a Chinese modern painting on a pearl.

Hunan is the cradle of Chu culture. The Chu culture has a unique foothold in Chinese culture — one of emotional romance. In modern and contemporary history, Hunan people played important roles with the fierce, bold, merry and lively mannerisms of the times — and “Hunan people” became a group of heroes joined in the creation of a new era and a modern country. The artistic creation in Hunan in the 1980s showed its vitality and energy to connect with

家》杂志上对谷文达进行大幅专题报道，这是谷文达首次在国内媒体露面，可视作谭力勤作为“批评家”的又一次出击；(二) 参加1986年由《中国美术报》和珠海画院联合主办的《八五青年美术新潮大型幻灯展暨学术讨论会》，作品《万物化生》在这次讨论会上得以展示，并得到了一定程度的重视，这可视为谭力勤作为“艺术家”的又一次出场。

80年代的谭力勤是怎样看待“艺术家和批评家的关系”这一当代艺术中颇受关注的话题的？他在1987年湖南美术出版社出版的《现代美术理论文集》“错开的五官—我的批评观之凿透”一文中表达了自己鲜明的立场，他认为“艺术批评是一种审美主体创造。有主体意识的批评家，才能成为艺术创作另一生产力，直接进行艺术财富创造。其文章本身，不仅有认识价值，更重要的是有审美价值，批评家本身便是艺术生产者。为此，如其称呼艺术批评家不如称批评艺术家更确切”。可知谭力勤将艺术批评视为一种与主体生命相关联的审美创造，他把“批评家”视为“批评艺术家”的观点，显示了他“艺术家”的本性。通读全文，谭力勤对“生命力”、“直觉”、“感性”、“情感”的推崇明显与80年代尼采哲学、生命哲学所营造的文化氛围相一致，而作者相对客观的分析态度则和他的知识积累以及80年代对理性反思的推崇相呼应。笔者在此无意对其批评观进行讨论，只想明确谭力勤当时的批评观和其未来的发展道路之间的呼应关系：由80年代谭力勤的批评观可知，现今的谭力勤成为一位专职艺术家是情理之中的事。

(二) 传统符号的波普式拼贴

苏晓华（舒群）在《不彻底的波普热》一文中（1986年12月《美术》杂志）对谭力勤的作品《万物化生》进行了分析和推荐。苏晓华在对劳申柏影响下的中国波普热进行批评的基础上，以“摆脱传统之禁锢”的程度为衡量标准，对《万物化生》进行了肯定。在苏看来，“这件作品在中国画制造材料上所采取的极端行为已远远超过了谷文达的文字系列，但就视觉图式自身的张力看却不及谷文达的图像的张力感觉强烈”。现在看来，苏的评价还是比较中肯的。在笔者看来，这件作品的观念性要强于作品本身的形式感，作品形式与卦象图（乾、坤）之间的对应有些简单化了，这无疑削弱了作品的文化批判力。但将该作品置于上世纪80年代的艺术氛围中，这件作品又具有了某种必然性。在当时的文化氛围中，对“中国画制造材料”作如此尖锐的揶揄，由此带来的对传统文化的质疑，无疑会对当时的传统坚守者形成强烈的冲击。

从1987年到上世纪90年代初，游走在国外的谭力勤继续了他在国内的创作思路。1990年4月，他在康戈迪亚大学VAV画廊展

original art on the one hand and to continue the participation and bravery of the “Hunan people” in modern society on the other hand — one that was filled with sprite spirit. In Tan’s works from the 1980s to the early 1990s, his artistic creation was closely related to the cultural atmosphere of Hunan. Tan was aware of and sensitive to the weakness inherit in the Chinese traditional literati paintings. Both indicating exploration and reflection of traditional culture, the artistic creation and comment on original Chu culture echo with each other—as an artist and a critic. Tan’s rational thoughts and judgment match his artistic enthusiasm sourced from nature.

Primitive Culture and Digital Technique

In 1993, Tan obtained a Masters of Art degree from the Faculty of Fine Arts at Concordia University. In 1996, he gained a Post-Graduate Diploma in Computer Animation/Multimedia Design from the School of Animation and Art, Sheridan College. Formerly as an artist and a critic, and now as an animation professor as well as a digital installation artist, Tan traveled throughout the USA, Canada, Singapore and China to work and teach in artistic creation.

Advanced techniques can become an obstacle for artists who choose to utilize them for artistic pursuits. Since the complexity of 3D animation technique is well-known, such obstacles are evident: 1. the difficulty to grasp techniques given the frequent updates, leading the user to be incompetent at artistic creation. 2. Those users who do keep on top of 3D animation techniques may become wrapped up in mulling over techniques and lose their drive for artistic creation, becoming a technical expert instead. 3. Traditional sculpting and painting skills themselves are closely related to artistic creation, so they can’t be understood on the same view and level as technique. 3D animation techniques stray from traditional techniques and converge towards technology, mathematics and physics knowledge — its logic and technology deviate from the essence of pure artistic creation.

As an artist (rather than animation technician) in the traditional sense, how Tan overcame this kind of obstacles is an important question — one whose answer helps to unravel the relationship between artistic creator and 3D animation artist. Tan sought and extended the source of his artistic creation to primitive culture. Through 3D animation techniques, he expressed his persona on modern culture by explaining primitive culture. Different from “Changing materials of Chinese painting,” Tan adopted primitive worship of North American Indian culture, Chinese art philosophy and primitive stories of African art in the new century. During this process, computer techniques became an effective tool for him to realize artistic creation, with functions other than artistic skills, such as shaping artistic figures, fabricating surface textures of artistic figures and editing virtual animation.

From 2000 onwards Tan’s works blend primitive culture and digital technique to foster artistic creation that appear polar opposites from the periphery — a commentary for the audience to reflect on their social environments and discover possible synergies beneath the readily visible.

Invented Objects and Physical Installations

People have different attitudes towards the virtual world vs. reality: 1. Some regard reality as exact reality, and the virtual world as distinctly virtual; their perception emphasizes the factuality of objects, but the heart remains calm without initiative. 2. The meaning of reality is identical to “all things turning out to be fruitless” to some extent, while the virtual world seems to fabricate a fairy tale and made-up paradise.

People often wish to escape reality via entrance into a virtual world. For instance, dreamt up fictions of ghosts, gods and warlords in the streets reflect peoples’ desires to achieve such illusions. Nowadays, with the rapid regeneration of Web techniques and computer software, the relationship between the “virtual

出了《竹文化系列》作品。将竹子作为冲击中国传统文人画的利器。其中的重要作品《天干与地支》中的8个斗笠被分别标了“甲、乙、丙、丁”（天干）和“子、丑、寅、卯”（地支）8个文字，颇具原始、粗犷的意味。这件作品明显延续了《万物化生》的创作思路，并另有拓展，艺术家对原始文化、传统文化的挖掘和转用较以往更加深入和强烈。在笔者看来，这是身处海外的谭力勤对祖国传统文化的自觉强调，也是他继往思路的进一步深化。在此之后他创作的“巨型算盘”把现代中国画装裱在算珠上面，更是上述创作思路的进一步延伸。

湖南是楚文化的发源地，楚文化以崇尚原始、激情浪漫为特征，在中国文化中独树一帜。在中国近现代史上，湖南人扮演了举足轻重的角色，其行事的强悍酣畅与时代需要相符合——“湖南人”成为世事造就的英雄群体，他们也参与造就了一个新时代，参与建造了一个现代国家。20世纪80年代的湖南艺术创作一方面彰显了与原始艺术相联结的生命激情；另一方面延续了近现代“湖南人”的入世和彪悍，作品充满了批判精神和张扬的情感。由谭力勤20世纪80年代到90年代初的创作可以发现，他的创作与湖南80年代的文化氛围密切相关，谭力勤始终对传统文人画的孱弱之弊表现出高度警戒。同是对传统的挖掘和反思，谭力勤的艺术创作和批评文字与来自远古的楚文化遥相呼应——作为艺术家和批评家的谭力勤，他的理性思辨和源自本真的艺术热情交相辉映。

（三）原始文化与数码技术

1993年，谭力勤获加拿大康戈利亚大学美术学院硕士学位；1996年，获加拿大谢尔丹学院动画艺术学校动画和电脑图形设计学士后文凭。曾经作为“艺术家”和“批评家”的谭力勤作为“三维动画”专业教授和数码装置艺术家游走于美国、加拿大、新加坡、中国，进行着他的教学工作和艺术创作。

先进技术可能成为借助此类技术进行艺术创作的艺术家们的障碍，三维动画技术的复杂性众人皆知，所以“障碍性”表现得尤为明显：1.掌握技术的难度以及技术更新的频繁使大多数从业者不能在艺术创作中游刃有余。2.熟练掌握三维动画技术的从业人员很可能沉迷于技术的玩味，而使艺术创作丧失了原始动力，成为“为技术而技术”的“专业”人员。3.传统的雕塑、绘画技法本身和艺术创作有着密不可分的关系，已经不能仅从技术层面来认识这些传统技法，其与艺术创作血肉相连。与这些传统技法不同的是，三维动画技术本身具有相对的独立性。向上追溯，它不是和传统艺术技法有血脉关系，而是和科学技术、数理知识有更多的关联，其本身的逻辑性和科技基础可能和艺术创作的原有本质相背离。

作为传统意义上的“艺术家”（而非动画技师），如何穿刺这些“障碍”？这是关系到三维动画艺术家艺术创作的重要问题。谭力勤将寻找艺术创作的源头拓展到了原始文化。他借助三维动画技术，在对原始文化的重新诠释中，表达了对当代文化的态度。不同于上世纪对“中国画制造材料”的借用，谭力勤在新世纪的创作中，主要围绕北美印第安人原始崇拜、中国艺术哲学和原始传说、非洲艺术的造型等素材进行创作。在此过程中，电脑技术成为他实现艺术作品的有效工具，在塑造艺术形象形体、制造艺术形象表面纹理、编辑虚拟动画等方面发挥着以往艺术手段所无法企及的功能。

在谭力勤的新世纪创作中，古老的原始文化与时新的数码技术构成了催生其艺术创作的两极，游走在这两极之间的谭力勤体验着时间的跨度，进行着艰难的勾连，作品则直接指向当下，催人深思社会环境和人类本身的真实处境。

（四）虚拟实体与现实装置

在“虚拟”和“现实”泾渭分明的条件下，人们对两者有两种态度：1.以实为实，以虚为虚：感知主体注重的是外物的实在

world” and “reality” becomes ever more complex. Our city has become a combination of a “city of practical physical configuration” and a “city of virtual information interaction”: the “city of virtual information interaction” was given more reality just like the “city of practical physical configuration,” while the “city of practical physical configuration” is more virtualized like the “city of virtual information interaction.” The relationship between the “virtual world” and “reality” reverses in some areas. Modern people wander between the virtual world and physical reality with a common state of mind, hoping to find a balancing pivot. It is not enough to depend only on fictions of ghosts and gods. As an artist, Tan connects the “virtual world” and “physical reality” in two aspects: 1. by reflecting on the reality of life by virtual art, which is a common theme of many excellent artists; 2. by reflecting on the virtual world constructed with computer techniques and by installation works created with computer modeling and graphics. The latter is one that is characteristic of Tan’s digital, artistic works.

Tan is of the opinion that there are three categories of modern animation: industrial animation, experimental and conceptual animation, and fine arts animation. He believes that his exploration belongs to the third category — fine arts animation, a concept that he invented and works toward. In his opinion, this type of animation is a kind of interactive installation art integrating animation and drawing, sculpture, installation, printing (engraving), and performance art. In an integrated sense, animation has become a part of the artworks, in such a way that it can be exhibited and interacted with in various forms.

In the real world outside the virtual world created by the computer, Tan externalizes the virtual images in installation works by aeropittura, transfer painting, shaping and displays them on wooden and steel plates and hides. For the three pieces of interactive installation works created by Tan and his students: “Conceptual Bop of Weight,” “Wave of Windmill,” and “Eternal Abnormality under Milling,” the three agricultural tools (weight, windmill, and mill) are points of inspiration, creation, and visual carrier of the works. Based on three-dimensional modeling and process control, the works become interactive through various devices, including the computer, electric motor, single-chip processor, rotary encoder, web camera and other modern devices. Through these electronic devices and techniques, the implied culture and social meaning of the seemingly ordinary tools are magnified, revealing the living conditions of people (including farmers who are disadvantaged groups, neglected intentionally or unintentionally). Hence, the works are violently critical and realistic. Moreover, these works integrate conceptual animation and animation installation, showing strong feelings of strength, quantity and continuously repetitive rhythm. All the animation factors are closely related to the concept, which embody the conditions of “unpractical reality” and “unbelievable credibility.”

By transforming digital animation works to digital installation works, Tan carried out dual reflections between the “virtual world” and “physical reality”: reflecting reality by virtual means and reflecting on the virtual world by real objects. During the process, what Tan really wanted to express is the realistic living condition of people in a world of indulgence, exhaustion, materialistic desire, localization of modern technology, inspiration of primitive culture, advantages and disadvantages of Western civilization, and the new meaning of Eastern culture in the new century.

After going abroad in 1987, Tan’s artistic creation developed in two spatial threads: i) China and the West and ii) the old and the modern. In these threads, Tan has explored the weaving of artistic creations across diverse cultural maps. From the transition of artistic creation from 1980s and early 1990s to the new century, Tan has shared many characteristics of artists from his generation and reflected different aspects of modern art in China. Undoubtedly, his progress and continuous exploration are significant for the development of modern art in China.

性，而“心”在此平静如水，犹如镜面，缺少主动性。2.以实为虚，以虚为实：前者颇有佛教所说的“万物皆空”的意味，后者则仿佛在编造童话，虚构人间天堂。

但人们总是渴望穿越“虚拟”和“现实”。大到神鬼小说、小到路边占卜术士，都是我们的这种“需求”造成的“供应”。网络技术、电脑软件迅速更新换代的今天，“虚拟”和“现实”的关系较以往更加复杂，我们所处的城市成为“物理形态的实在之城”和“信息交织而成的虚拟之城”的综合体，“信息交织而成的虚拟之城”越来越具有“物理形态的实在之城”的实在性，而“物理形态的实在之城”越来越具有“信息交织而成的虚拟之城”的虚拟性。“虚拟”和“现实”之间的关系甚至在某些领域发生了颠倒。当代都市人穿越于虚实之间，基于这种经历形成了一种带有普遍性的社会心态，并渴望找到一个平衡点。仅有神鬼小说和占卜术士是不够的，作为艺术家的谭力勤在两个层面对“虚拟”和“现实”进行了穿刺：1.借艺术之“虚”穿刺生活之“实”，这是所有出色艺术家都在进行的工作。2.借电脑模型、电脑绘画衍生创作装置作品，穿刺电脑技术所建造的虚拟世界。后者是谭力勤数码艺术作品的特色之一。

谭力勤将现代动画分为三类：产业商品动画 (Industrial Animation)、实验与观念动画 (Experimental and Conceptual Animation)、纯艺术形式动画 (Fine Arts Animation)。谭力勤认为自己的探索属于第三种类型——“纯艺术形式动画”这是他提出的新概念，也是他的主要研究方向。对谭力勤来讲，这一类动画是动画与绘画、雕塑、装置、印制 (版画)、行为艺术综合而成的一种互动装置艺术样式。在这一综合类型中，动画已变为艺术作品的一部分，因此对它的展现与播放需要走向多样化。

在电脑营造的虚拟世界之外，亦即现实世界之中，谭力勤把虚拟世界中建造的形体通过喷绘、转印、塑型等多种手段进行具体化，在木板、钢板、兽皮上进行第二次创作，于是装置作品得以诞生。在谭力勤新近带领学生共同创作的三件互动装置作品（《重量中的观念波普》、《风车风》、《碾磨中的永恒异体》）中，农业社会的三件生产工具（秤砣、风车、磨盘）成为作品的灵感激发点、创作初始点和视觉载体，在三维建模、程序控制的基础上，作品理念借电脑、电机、单片机控制器、旋转编码器、摄像头等现代设备来实现动画互动效果。借助这些能够营造虚拟效果的电子设备和技术支持，原来看似平淡无奇的“生产工具”所内蕴的文化含义、社会含义被成倍地放大，直接凸现了社会人群（包括农民在内——他们经常是被无意、有意忽略的弱勢群体）的生存现实，具有强烈的社会批判性和现实性。更重要的是他们在此系列作品中把观念动画与动画装置紧密地结合为一体，动画中有一种强烈的力度感、量感和不断重复的节奏。所有动画的因素都紧紧与观念相联，从而表现出一种“不现实的现实”，“不可信的可信”状态。

由创作数码动画作品到创作数码装置作品的转化，谭力勤在“虚拟”和“现实”之间进行了双重穿刺：由现实杀入到虚拟，再由虚拟杀出回现实。在这“杀入、杀出”的过程中，谭力勤真正想表现的是现实人群的生存境遇，物欲横流时代的放纵困顿；时新科技的局限性，原始文化的启示性；西方文明的优缺点，东方文化的新世纪意义。

1987年出国后，对谭力勤来讲，古、今的时间纬度上又添加了中、西的空间经线，在时空经纬线编制而成的文化版图上，谭力勤在诸多两极间进行着文化游走。从上世纪80年代、90年代初的当代艺术创作，到新世纪的专业转型，谭力勤身上折射了这一代艺术家的诸多特征，涉及了中国当代艺术的多个层面。毋庸置疑，他的游走和探索对于中国当代艺术的发展具有重要意义。

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