

Conversation with Wai-Lim Yip: "Contemporary Art and Taoism."

"Beauty is what makes happy." Wittgenstein

"Speech is not merely a breath. The speaker has something to say. But this something is not determined by speech. So, does speech exist or not? The speaker is different from a tweeting chick, does he differ from it or not?"

Tchouang-Tseu

To begin with, I would like to thank Professor Wai-Lim Yip for his outstanding introduction, which I listened carefully. For the last few days I read his texts and I greatly appreciate his analysis of Taoism and the connection he makes with contemporary arts. In principle, I share Professor Yip's convictions about a number of points, even though on some other issues we have slight differences of opinion, which I will expose in the following remarks.

True, we are living now in a world driven, so to speak, by the West. But at the same time our present world can be characterized by the diversity of cultures and values that are living together and interchanging with one another from the point of view of art as well as from that of art. I must confess, I feel happy to live in our times. Are we not lucky to live more than one life in just one life?

As Gao Minglu pointed out this morning, Western history evolves through a continuous move and through breaks. Considering the dichotomic radicalization in which the West has engaged, the exploitation of such symbolic tension resulted in the principle of evolution which is grounded on an antagonistic order. On the contrary, in the Eastern tradition, history proceeds and evolves according to a pattern of changes and transformations.

Change and transformation are the movements coming from a harmonious collaboration with the opposition-relation. In an Eastern world, things are always interpreted in function of interdependency. The theme "Past in Reverse" is a very significant issue, though a paradoxical one, but as I will explain later on, paradox is one of the most important aspects in contemporary art.

The past does matter. It is important, because it opens up the possibility of transformation and change. Its value lies in the absolute possibility of opening. In other words, the past is the possibility that is still open or the potentiality that is not yet actualized. The present displays transformation and change as a continuous movement of opening, that is, of life itself. The future is the possibility of re-opening transformation and change, and is characterized by the moment of return that is called "*fan*" in Chinese and "*ban*" in Korean. It is an important notion in the East: it is the movement of Tao and Chaos, "*Hun tun*."

In that sense, tradition does not mean a form instituted once for all, or an absolute value, but it is nothing other than the absolute potentiality of the whole change and transformation process. Thus tradition is the possibility itself. In other words, tradition is "energy" (*ch'i*), it is the empty center (*hsü*), and it is the empty receptacle. "The cart moves forward thanks to the empty kern, without which it cannot move," Lao-Tseu says. This is what makes possible an understanding of contemporary art.

I intend to investigate into some singular characters which, according to my experience, recently appeared in the landscape of contemporary art. Indeed, they share a common feature with the singular characters of Taoist thought!

At first, present art can be characterized by the diversity in the various expressions and research fields that coexist simultaneously, which explains the multiplicity of aesthetic forms and the plurality of viewpoints: it all intermingles, apart from any established order; everything coexists and appears simultaneously, forming a landscape that may be viewed as blurred and confusing. I find such confusion very appealing. In a paradoxical way, this hazy landscape allows for the diversity of the many points of view and for the opening onto the unknown; on the contrary, it rejects delimitation, categorization, hierarchy and discrimination. To some extent, "Past in Reverse" is an attempt to reach a clear and distinct idea, but is a clear vision really necessary?

According to Tchouang-Tseu, confusion is an important notion. Confused, the Taoist can not distinguish between the beautiful and the ugly. Confusion is possible only in the horizon of difference and, by the same stroke, of in-differentiation and of equality value. Confusion makes possible to see whatever is free from any determined order, and thus incites us to engage into the infinite openness, without limit and prejudice. Tchouang-Tseu uses an expression that expresses adequately this condition: what he calls "*yu*," "floating" or "free wandering." It names natural freedom or "interpenetration without obstruction," according to the Chan Buddhism: the condition where each being can freely coexist with each other, so that all beings exchange their difference in a harmonious way and without discrimination.

I like to compare this diversified and confused landscape to a landscape seen from a bird's point of view. A bird looks at the landscape from above, and sees every and each thing at once and without limit. The bird's vision is precisely the same airy perspective that is shown in landscape painting (such as those shown in Yip's slides). The bird's vision is different from the Euclidean perspective that is ruled by a viewpoint and presupposes a hierarchical order. In this respect, it is important to realize that we are nowadays, thanks to the advancement of technology, quite acquainted with the bird's vision, which coincides with a landscape seen from a satellite. For us, especially in the West, this is a new perspective, a terrific opening, a possibility of seeing in another way than through the **monolithic way of thinking**.

Another significant aspect in contemporary art lies in a pragmatic approach that can be tested at different levels. At first, a strong will from the artists in the “demystification” of the ego. In a way, this movement does not date back to yesterday. Wai-Lim Yip just reminded us of artistic movements such as dada, Fluxus and John Cage—which should be replaced in their historical context. The importance of these movements above all lies in the teaching that their artists were able to transmit to us, namely that art and life are inseparable and constitute a single whole. They allowed art and esthetics to open up the established Rule from the past. Their art movement must be considered as attempt to reawaken us a common value of our ordinary life as art. We know that John Cage was very much involved in Eastern thinking. His music of *Silence*, coming from chance operations, is deeply impregnated with the process of Tao thinking and Zen Buddhism.

In my opinion, John Cage’s importance lies not so much in what he actually did than in the opening he brought to us. I am speaking here of an opening not only at the level of the history of Western music, but in the first place, from a more general viewpoint, at the level of spirit and life. Cage’s work is based on the principle of harmony, where each being has its center among others, and consequently has no established form, but this is a life process. In that sense, an even more important task is to place his work *in* its historical and geographical, Western and American context.

With the Easterners, the question of the ego should be phrased in different terms. They tend to consider more important the acknowledgment of the existence of non-ego: ego is not absolute, but relative and is considered only through the relation with one another. Each one and each thing has his own nature. That is why chance, and chance operations acquire a different meaning. So to speak, I can say that I am born by “chance operation,” and so is my name, which my parents conceived after consulting the *I-Ching*. So I don’t need to follow a “chance operation” for resolve my ego problem.

“Demystification of the ego” is a form of “contextualization of the ego,” and it is a very important aspect of contemporary art. Let me quote Tchouang-Tseu: “If there is no other one than me, there is no me. But if there is no me, nothing can any longer be grasped.”

Then let me remind you of some Taoist notions: first, the *wu-a*, the non-ego or *wang-a* for Tchouang-Tseu: the “forgotten ego” or *shang-a*, the “loss of ego.” This is the moment when the “ego” meets the external world, *wu-hua*: it is a process of indifferenciation and indistinction between the ego and its context. It is precisely the process of “knowledge,” *shi*, synonymous with *wu-shi*, “non-knowledge” in Tchouang-Tseu: “while forgetting oneself, one knows the unknown.” More precisely, it is the process of “perception,” *ch’i*, the moment of self-realization that proceeds according the process of reception, *chu*, and of transformation, *p’ien*. Reception occurs in the “mind,” more precisely, the “empty mind,” *hsu hsün*. Open mind is necessary to make us discover our ignorance. Something happens at every moment in our life, we need only to open our eyes and find it. The infinitely small and ordinary can be infinitely big and extra-ordinary. What really matters is not what to do, but how to proceed. As a “form of life,” art operates in the same manner as life does. When Wittgenstein says that “esthetics and ethics are but one,” this statement reflects a quite Taoist vision.

Many artists have undergone what I consider as a most important and significant attempt to seek for voluntarily stupid gestures or simply to look for ordinary gestures. We should consider these gestures with a specific attention: not as an antagonistic attitude interrogating and refusing the established rule considered as absolute, but above all as a call for these ordinary qualities. Stupidity allows us to go further down the road; and this is one of the important aspects of the ordinary language: it opposes absolute truth—an aspect that Wittgenstein also underlined.

For the Taoists, word has the singularity of being limited, and its displaying is necessary to reach the infinite. In Tchouang-Tseu there are three levels of word (which “says silence”).

First, there is *U-yen*, the “stupid word,” synonymous with *kuang-yen*, the “mad word.” Since word is limited, how could one go further if not only through the expression of crazy people and idiots whose sense oversteps the boundaries of language? A clear attempt to drive word out of its limited context.

The second level of word is *chung-yen*, the “pondering word” or the “word from the Ancients when it sounds straight.” And we should remember that “quotation” has been a favorite claim from postmodernity.

Then there is *chi-yen*, the “fluctuating word,” that is to say, “the word that says the nature of things”: the term *chi* refers to the image of a (empty) vase that, once filled with water, became empty. Therefore it responds to the kind of word that is able to extend in every direction, and thus to expand *ad infinitum*.

Before ending my intervention, I would like to briefly examine an important aspect that appears presently. It is about the notion of copy. Not only in the arts but also in everyday life copy has become one of the keynotes in life and creation. The East copies the West which copies the East and vice-versa and on and on. Sometimes I hear Westerners ask: “Why are you no longer practicing as you used to do in the past the art of brush and ink?” But, it is difficult to drive a car in a traditional costume, especially when you are pragmatic as we, Easterners, are!

There is a real difference of interpretation of copy between the Western and the Eastern notion of tradition. The idea of a copy belongs to one of the principle concepts in the esthetics of painting: it is closely associated with the notions of image and representation. It goes the same way in the East: imitation played an important role in Chinese and Korean painting, but through a completely different interpretation. Since always in the Eastern history, copy has been the important process for artistic creation. In the aesthetics of painting, several notions refer to the idea of copy. There are *fang*, *lim* and *p’ien*.

Fang refers rather to study and exercise: copying as an exercise for beginners and as a method of learning; but there is also the copy in the sense of a “resemblance.” “Resembling” is the moment when the two meet and this meeting is from a correlative order. Then, there is the copy as a method for learning the Classics. A step further, the copy, this time, means the method through which the individual reaches creation and self-realization: according to Tung Ch’I-Chang, it defines the moment of “communion with the spirit of the Ancients”, hence the Way of creation. *p’ien*, transformation, is another concept, linked with the notion of imitation, *fang*, but as a unique gesture and as a possibility of change and transformation.

The notion of *lim* refers rather to the idea of copy but in a different mode from *fang*: a copy as a method of re-newing, of restore for conservation or as method of falsification.

We should investigate further into the modernist analysis of the idea of copy in Walter Benjamin and compare it with one of the Eastern notions of copy so to establish a parallel. This opens up a way for an encounter between the West and the East.

Lucia Sanroman (question from the audience):

Among the pieces shown in the exhibition there is one that is called “Pap-Gre,” a video projection onto a white vase. Could you tell us the reason why you used this vase, and would you accept to replace it by another one?

Soun-Gui Kim:

It’s a “Moon Vase,” more precisely, the copy of “Moon Vase” that I made with the help of a craftsman. “Moon Vase” comes from Korea. It is made out of white porcelain formed as an “almost full moon.” It appears for the first time around the 16th century and was highly valued, above all among poets. Its beauty due to a unique simplicity turned the poets motionless and lazy, for they were contemplating its perfection day and night along...

Yes, I surely could have used another one without any problem. Besides, considering the difficulty of its fabrication (particularly because of its wide size), the direction of the Museum suggested me to replace it with another that would be alike. I accepted. But then we had to prepare a video projector adapted for a small image projection, and we could not afford it. Thus, we decided to make a copy of “Moon Vase.” I like this vase. While looking at this tasteless and insignificant vase, I can wander like clouds, being lazy and thinking of nothing. Laziness is very important; it gives me the spiritual food for my creation. When I was younger, I was looking for new ideas, and I would rather build and conceive than find and receive.

Thank you for having endured patiently my poor English. Perhaps, it reflects the Buddhist character in which clumsiness is also a great quality?

Soun-Gui Kim, 29 November 2004.

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