

Posthuman View

Xiaolei TIAN 田晓磊

The words “fragility” and “collapse” are often reflected in Xiaolei TIAN’s work, specifically, the sense of vulnerability and crisis that threatens to collapse. For him, the pandemic is the result of a chain of events, similar to a cascading reaction. No one realised at first that the virus would be so radioactive and that it would also lead to the interruption of all activities throughout society. Restrictions appear from country to country, people to people, and eventually, all life was messed up.

“我们”“他们”是相互依存、相互影响的，但又是相互对立的。这种对立和依存的关系，在疫情期间表现得尤为突出。病毒的出现，打破了人类社会的正常运转，也打破了人与人之间的正常交往。这种打破和重建的过程，就是人类文明的脆弱性和危机感的体现。田晓磊的作品，正是对这种脆弱性和危机感的深刻反思和表达。

Thrilling stabilization

田晓磊

The astronaut is a symbol of man’s exploration of himself or a human figure cultivated by the spirit of science. He is constantly exploring new planets, and when he gets to the next one, it becomes a ball light in a ballroom, but it slowly blows up like a self-cracking explosion. And when he goes to the next one, the last one is restored, and man is like a locust, passing and exploring one by one.

宇航员是人类探索自我的象征，也是科学精神的化身。他不断地探索新的星球，当他到达下一个星球时，它就像一个舞厅里的球灯，但它会慢慢地像一场自我爆炸的爆炸。当他去下一个星球时，最后一个星球被恢复了，人类就像一只蝗虫，一个接一个地探索和通过。

Interview

The names are abbreviated as “Jackie”(Jackie GA0) and “TIAN”(Xiaolei TIAN)

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Jackie: As R-Lab is an organisation that explores the transformation and changes in Art during the pandemic, so our discussion will focus on the potential discourse that the pandemic provides for the transformation of art.

First, have there been any changes in your life and work since the outbreak that have impacted you?

R-Lab

[illegible]

TIAN: At the beginning it was very intense, but now I feel it has become very easier in Beijing, apart from that, sometimes, we still wear masks when going into public places.

[illegible]

However, when the pandemic first broke out, the feeling of change was very noticeable, as if there was tension around us all the time. The city management also tended to be stricter and more closed off. Whenever we went to some places, we needed to have proof of access and went through many checks which inevitably created more stress for us.

[illegible]

This change has affected all aspects of society, the main impact was about traveling, and we all had to take activities indoors mostly. Everyone was like an island, seeking information with the outside world, and the only

option had become the internet and our phones.

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TIAN: I think the key words I am thinking about now are “fragility” and “collapse”. This may also be reflected in my work, specifically, the fragility of the status quo and the

sense of crisis that there is a possibility of collapse. As the pandemic caused a series of events triggered by a single event, it is like a chain reaction. It was not acknowledged at the beginning that it would be so destructive, even leading to a state of almost stagnation throughout society. There were all sorts of restrictions between regions and between people, and eventually everything just went haywire.

It is as if our current situation cannot withstand any fluctuations, and a problem of any aspects could bring the whole society to a status of standstill. This vulnerability was much stronger than we thought. A problem in one area seemed to mean the whole world went wrong in an interconnected way. It felt like the current world order was not actually very solid, it only appeared stable on the surface, and it could not adapt to the change as quickly as we thought; like a wound, it takes a long time to heal, and its pain is global and continuous. So, I might rethink some of the topics about the sense of vulnerability, or the instability, etc.

Jackie: Yes, these two words are very concrete, and they are reflected in your work. In fact, I have noticed that you have used some visual expressions in many of your works, such as the LED gallery in Hangzhou, the 'specimen form appeared on the flat screen' presentation in *Posthuman Zoo*, and the 'screen formalin' concept. I think the concept of "screen formalin" is very clever, so how did you come up with the idea of using this kind of presentation? Do these works have a

TIAN: Actually, I am better at working on the computer, which probably allows me to be more open and flexible than I would be. Because there are a lot of specific constraints, such as materials, costs, space, and time, and even a lot of mechanical or other specific problems, but on the computer, these are not really problems. In the future, it could be made into VR – VR is already being done, wearing 3D glasses, the world would be real, it's like we are looking at exhibitions in a virtual museum, so the experience could be better.

Jackie: Right, so do you think the concept of 'screen formalin', is there some overlay or overlap of context between this concept and the pandemic?

TIAN: The pandemic has catalysed the fulfillment of the concept.

Jackie: As an audience, from my point of view, the pandemic is a continuation of the concept of this series of works. You just said that the pandemic is akin to a push for the fulfilment of these ideas, which I think is indicative of the prophetic nature of the post-human perspective of this work, the pandemic is akin to a validation, which is also interesting.

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TIAN: Yes, the audiences are free to make associations. Although they might have different perspectives to what the artist initially thought, however, it is very normal and the artist would like the audiences to do so, to have various interpretations.

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Jackie: It is. I think that is also one of the charms of art. Therefore, it has brought a lot of changes due to the pandemic, so what might be the most impressive change that the pandemic has imparted on the art world?

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TIAN: I think it is the fact that there are more artworks online, or that people have a stronger desire to showcase it. It used to seem like people were a bit secretive and would not always post their ideas on public platforms. But then I found that people were trying to promote themselves in every way possible. However, there is probably so much information on the internet that even if you do speak up, you might not always be noticed. People only have a limited attention span and most of their attention was taken up by those platforms who have a way of knowing what could get people's attention, even if it's not necessarily what they really want or like. At the same time, because of the lockdown, there were more online exhibitions.

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Jackie: That is right, you have been very specific about

the profound shifts in the Art world. So, let us go back to your work. I have seen some short videos on your Weibo account, such as *Before the Reboot* and the *Mythology* series, which have some astronaut and planet elements in them. What are your thoughts on applying these elements in a post-human context?

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TIAN: These astronauts relate to the stability, fragility, and collapse that we just talked about. In *The Thrill of Stability*, for example, the astronaut actually symbolises a human exploration of himself, or an image of a human being cultivated by the spirit of science. He is constantly exploring new planets, and as he goes onto a planet, that planet would become a ball light in a ballroom, and then slowly collapse and blow itself up, and as he is walking towards the next one, the last one resume, which could give a feeling of a human being as like the locust, going from a planet to another for plundering.

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That is also what *Before the Reboot* is about. They are having a carnival dance, but the man has started to take on a distorted and deadly character, and the background has changed from a starry sky to a blue screen, a sense of one last carnival before the end. That is how I interpret it, but audiences may see it differently.

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Jackie: I think this is also a wonderful piece of work. And as an artist who mainly works in the field of new media art, what do you think is the relationship between Technology and Art?

TIAN: Technology and Art are closely linked. Historically speaking, technology and art are one and the same, but I think it is basically technology that drives art. Because art is only beneficial if people are well fed and clothed. Like the technological revolution, which invented so many technologies that are particularly useful for life, such as CT, and technology has in turn contributed to the development of art, rather than art contributing to the invention of technology. Because art does not have that much objective energy, it's the economy that's behind the technology, and the economy drives the technology, and then the technology drives the whole society from all aspects.

In fact, from the invention of pigments to the computer, the Internet, including VR and artificial intelligence, all these inventions have been promoting art and finding new possibilities for it. Some of them are material, some are directly conceptual. In fact, art and technology are one and the same, but technology comes first, and art comes second.

Jackie: Well, yes, the economic base determines the superstructure. Then we come to the next question, the concept of the post-pandemic era was proposed in a way that overlaps with the context of the post-human era that you proposed earlier, can you talk about what would be potentially illuminating about the post-human era for what we call the post-pandemic era?

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[illegible]

TIAN: I think the post-pandemic would accelerate the post-human era because the pandemic is accelerating the rate at which people are incubating in the virtual world, people are becoming more dependent on the internet, and we are taking a step further towards a cyberpunk-like world. In general, man has become more and more adapted to machines, to the evolution of technology, and conversely man has become more and more updated to them. There is a heavy dependence on technology, especially in some big cities, people there has reached an unrealistic level of dependence on technology. It is as if people are handicapped once they have been removed from certain technologies. For example, if you do not have navigation app on your mobile phone, you may not even know where you are driving. The use of the Internet for express delivery, ordering food, having fun, etc. has also increased our dependence on it. So, I think people would probably be happier in the virtual world, and this process may last for a few hundred years. As the technology becomes more and more mature, people will spend more time in the virtual world than, for example, gaming time now feels like a lot, as well as brushing Jitterbug or some other social media software. Excitement and entertainment, this is the next direction. People's time has slowly been taken over by some technology, so I think the pandemic is a kind of acceleration, I guess.

1. 在VR环境中，用户通过手柄或控制器与虚拟对象进行交互。这种交互可以是直接的（如抓取、移动）或间接的（如通过菜单选择）。

2. 交互过程通常涉及感知、决策和行动三个阶段。用户首先感知到虚拟对象的存在和属性，然后做出决策（如是否抓取），最后执行行动（如移动手柄）。

3. 交互的反馈是至关重要的。用户需要能够感知到自己的行动对虚拟环境产生的影响，例如视觉上的变化或触觉上的反馈。

4. 交互设计应遵循自然性和易用性原则，尽量减少学习成本，使用户能够直观地理解和使用虚拟环境。

5. 随着技术的发展，VR交互方式也在不断创新，如手势识别、眼动追踪等，这些技术将进一步丰富用户的交互体验。

Jackie: According to what you have just said, technology might gradually take over our physical world and art world. Do you

think this form of online art exhibition may gradually become mainstream in the future or even replace the physical art exhibitions completely?

[illegible]

TIAN: It is impossible to replace the physical ones, because people have not lived completely online yet after all, and it's only when they live completely online that offline is likely to be replaced. Exhibitions could become like games, where you could interact on your mobile phone, but right now we have not seen any exhibitions that are interactive enough to attract people, so there are still no big surprises comparing with physical exhibitions. A well-done online exhibition could complete the exhibition in the process of playing it, rather than still being a simple viewing experience.

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Jackie: It is saying that the development of online exhibitions is not very mature now, isn't it?

[illegible]

TIAN: Yes, but I rarely see physical exhibitions now. It depends on who the audience is. For young people, they have a demand to go to physical exhibitions, for dating or socialising. They must be the main audience for physical exhibitions. However, the cost of physical exhibitions is relatively higher, mainly in terms of time. For example, if you are busy at work, the time cost of watching a film on your mobile phone is different from watching a film in the cinema. In the latter case you must spend several hours, or even half an hour preparing before leaving home. So now the exhibition must be attractive enough and famous enough or have a

following to go and attract people. Otherwise, it is satisfied for people to go through exhibitions online.

[illegible]

Jackie: Yes. There was some discussion about technology pushing art forward, could you talk about the impact this has on the future of the art industry? And how might this affect your future work?

[illegible]

TIAN: In fact, the combination of technology and art in China is quite hot right now. Because to some extent, art has fallen into a big dilemma, so it needs technology to give it a new breakthrough. Firstly, there is a lot of potential for technology, because it appeals to young people and it is easy to create a buzz, and secondly, commerce likes it, for example, many shopping malls and advertisers would like to incorporate new technologies into art in their exhibitions. In China, the combination of technology and art has been very popular in recent years.

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Jackie: This is a brand-new point of view.

TIAN: All of these points are actually mentioned in Kevin Kelly’s book, which I do prefer, and some of them I’ve put it out in another way in my work.

Jackie: Exactly, I could feel your self-interpretation in your work. So that concludes our interview for today, thank you for sharing.

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