

## Posthuman View

# Xiaolei TIAN 田晓雷

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.

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## Thrilling stabilization

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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.

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# 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**

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**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.

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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.

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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

reflective effect on the context of the pandemic?

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**TIAN:** Actually, those works started as an attempt to do it inside a box, to create the screen itself as a space. I think that was a little proposition I gave myself or a little restriction. It was a spatial restriction so that it would be better organised. From a formalism point of view, I focus more on the spatial relationship of the content, that is, the relationship between the content itself and the container. Later, I felt that this was making patterns, so I created some of these imaginary patterns that I imagined to be related to post-humanism. Of course, it is a long-term project that will probably take a few years to develop and refine, and eventually it will become a series. And it will all be displayed side by side, probably in many boxes, each with a different object in it, and eventually it will be displayed like a museum and could be collected on screen.

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**Jackie:** I think this is a particularly great concept because including the 'screen formalin', which you mentioned earlier is a developing concept, which has porosity. What is also interesting is that long before the outbreak you proposed this concept, but once again when you look at it through the lens of the pandemic, its meaning has changed. I think this point also proves that the work does have an extensibility about it and a kind of prophetic quality too.

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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:** 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.

**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?

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**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?

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**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



Because there is no breakthrough in basic theory right now, it needs a process of accumulation, and there is a rhythm of quantitative change producing qualitative change. So, I think there is going to be a slow mix of technologies, there is going to be a lot of subdivision of new ways to play. I think it is going to be very great.

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**Jackie:** This reminds me of your previous work in which you mentioned that technology has a life of its own. Do you have an idea or thought about this?

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**TIAN:** Technology itself is like a kind of life. Kevin Kelly wrote a trilogy that is actually talking about this. People are nurturing technology into life and trying in various fields to make artificial intelligence become like a life form, for example, it can control itself, make itself, and then he also wants it to be conscious at the end, in fact, they are all working on this. I think that after continuous experimentation, once the direction of evolution is determined, it will evolve successfully. It is just a matter of time because human beings have evolved over a long period of time. However, this is just a natural and slow evolution, but the time it took for man to cultivate technology was actually very short, and perhaps in another 1,000 years, this could break through even faster. It is giving a sense that human is cultivating a strong and powerful life from the point of view of the evolution of living things.

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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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