

Art, (at least in the Romantic tradition), is the result of a creative act upon some dead material, which means, metaphorically, that it is the result of an act that inspires life into dead matter. Metaphorically, a work of art "lives", but, of course, it does not live in the literal sense of the term. It is an object, not a living organism. (This is the reason why Romantic tradition suggests a terminology which should be used without exaggeration). Now mankind has never accepted this limitation: not to be able to inspire life into dead matter. (As mankind does not accept any limitation imposed on it by its condition.) The myth of Pygmalion, (and similar ones), shows that the idea of creating in the literal sense, of giving life to dead matter, was never abandoned. And there is a steady line through the Golem and the Automatic Man in the direction of the Electronic Turtle. A steady line in search of the goal to be God-like. But something has happened along that line which does not bode well for this Promethean effort. Man has forgotten, somewhere along the line, that to inspire life into dead matter is an artistic commitment. By apparently glorifying art, man has degraded it in fact to the role of a metaphorical creation, and is reserving the true life-giving creation to scientific endeavor. No wonder, therefore, that if we are going to have a "biological revolution" as we had a "mechanical" one in the 18th century, we shall be surrounded by artificial living organisms of the monstrous type, (Frankensteinian beasts and Golems). Such a revolution would very probably be even more de-humanizing than was the first one.

Now Tsai has appeared to remind us of the basic fact that to give life to dead matter is to animate the world with the human spirit. And that the human spirit is that form-giving principle which articulates itself in beauty. To remind us of the basic fact that every human articulation is either beautiful, or it is a dangerous deformation. Thus what Tsai is doing is to return to the sources from which all life-giving efforts come: commitment to beauty. In other words: Tsai's quasi-animated objects are true attempts in the direction of creation of life, (much truer than are the parallel attempts made by biologists and cyberneticians), because they are artistic. It is from this point of view that one can try to understand what Tsai is doing.

It would be difficult to understand otherwise the apparent contradiction in Tsai's work between the elaborate, sophisticated and costly techniques on the one hand, and their playful, naive and child-like character on the other. An apparent contradiction within a spirit that is immersed into scientific and technological problems on the one hand, and that aims at achieving a very simple, immediate and concrete pleasure on the other. But if we see what Tsai is doing as the effort to use scientific and techno

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logical knowledge for the creation of living things, of things that are not merely there, but that respond to us and establish a sort of dialogue with us, the apparent contradiction disappears, and it becomes obvious that Tsai's is the only possible method. Because to create such sort of things, it is necessary to make use of all available scientific knowledge, but to create such sort of things in a way that they become truly alive, it is necessary to abandon with relation to them every sophistication. In fact, this combination between technical sophistication and existential naiveté is what characterizes every true artistic being-in-the-world.

The things Tsai does are meant for children, or for people who still know how to enjoy themselves as if they were children. And this in itself is important. Because playthings are "pure" things, in the sense that they give joy without regard to their possible usefulness in the struggle of man against his surroundings. It is in this sense that Tsai's things are "pure" art. This is their beauty. But playthings are not necessarily "useless". On the contrary, they may be considered embryonic stages of the useful instruments with which man conquers the world, (or destroys it and himself with it). And it is in this way that Tsai's things are playthings. One can see through them the further stages of their possible development, the animated instruments of the future. Tsai's things are playthings in the sense that they are playful proposals for possible future animated human surroundings. They are the playful, child-like first stages of the life-inspiring cybernetic revolution. Which means that they are not only beautiful, but also charged with an inner dynamic.

This is the reason why what Tsai is doing is so very important. His is a possible opening toward new horizons that let us see a human situation in which man is no longer surrounded by inanimate objects. Many of our problems have to do with the fact that the inanimate objects are apparently mute ly there at our disposal, but in reality impose themselves upon our lives and dominate it. Animate objects would certainly give our situation a completely different climate. They would not react to our acts, but would respond to them. How they would do so we can already feel in observing the "behavior" of the things Tsai is making. And such an observation gives us pleasure. Should the revolution that is appearing on our horizon be influenced more by work of the type Tsai is proposing, and less by merely scientific and technological work, it is possible that the new situation it will create will be more human than it is at present. We need people like Tsai, if we are to escape the ever more oppressive omnipresence of inanimate apparatus in our surroundings. Which is to say that we need artists who are scientifically trained, but have preserved their human, naive and playful openness toward the simplicity of living. In other words: true artists.