

ASPECTS AND PROSPECTS OF TSAI'S WORK
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The term "work of art" can be defined in a very broad and in a very strict sense. In the very broad sense a "work of art" is anything that was taken out of the context of nature and changed according to a model. In this sense it is possible to call the sum total of works of art "our cultural surroundings". In the very strict sense a "work of art" is any thing that was taken out of the natural context and changed in such a way that it may convey an "esthetic" experience to its beholder. In this sense an analysis of our cultural surroundings will reveal two classes of "works", those of "art" and others. In the first sense, the word "art" means any method to change a thing of nature. In the second sense the word "art" means a specific method, (the one that aims at communicating a specific sort of experience, which is called "esthetic" for the lack of a better word to describe it). In both sense the word "work" means the result of any methodical change in a natural thing; it means an object of culture. A phenomenological analysis of our cultural surroundings will reveal that it is composed of objects behind which hide things of nature and a model. For instance; a phenomenological analysis of a typewriter will reveal aluminum, iron, (and other natural things), and it will reveal the model according to which these natural things were manipulated to result in the typewriter as a cultural object. A further analysis will have to bifurcate into the research of the natural things hidden by the typewriter, (into the science of nature), and into the research of the model hidden by the typewriter, (into the science of culture, or, if one so prefers, the science of the "spirit").

Now what such an analysis will have revealed is the fact that our cultural surroundings is composed of objects. Namely of things which (although they were changed according to models), still stand around us just like the things of nature. The manipulation of natural things which changed them into cultural objects did not change their "thingity", namely their standing around us. There is a specific structure to our relationship with things that stand around us, (be they things of nature or cultural objects); we act upon them and they react to our action. This structure can be described as follows: (1) In the process of living we find a thing, (be it natural or cultural), which stands in the way of our "life project". (This is what is meant by the word "object") (2) We try to remove the thing, put it out of our way and thus proceed in our "life project". (This is what is meant by the word "praxis".) (3) The thing resists passively to our attempt to remove it. (This is what is called "inertia", or "perfidy of matter".) (4) Our attempt to remove the thing changes the thing, and its resistance to our attempt changes ourselves and our "life project". (This is what is meant when we say that we are "determined" by the things that surround us.) Therefore such an analysis of our cultural surroundings will reveal that we are just as much "determined" by cultural objects as we are by the things of nature. In fact; since most of the things that surround us are of the type "cultural objects", we are at present much more "determined" by

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cultural objects than we are by the things of nature. Now this poses a serious problem; Culture is the result of manipulation of natural things, which means that it is the result of attempts to remove those things, to clear our way, to free ourselves from their determination. But analysis shows that those attempts must fail, because the natural things thus manipulated continue to be "objects", namely determining factors. The whole attempt to change nature into culture, the entire commitment to cultural activity as a "liberation from natural" determination", is thus put into question.

But not everything we find in the process of living is a "thing", in the sense that we are related to it through the "action-reaction" structure. We also find phenomena during life to which we are related through a quite different sort of structure. This may be called a "dialogical" structure and can be described as follows: (1) In the process of living we find a phenomenon which at first we take to be a thing and try to remove it. (2) To this attempt the phenomenon replies by attempting itself to remove ourselves out of its own "project". (3) There follows the shock of mutual recognition; the meeting of two similar "projects". (4) The mutual recognition is followed by an exchange of information, which, in the last analysis, means an exchange of methods to remove objects. (5) An alliance is formed between our own "project" and the "other project", and both now advance on parallel lines against the things that stand around both. A phenomenon to which we are related through such a structure can be called "the other". It does not determine us, but on the contrary, allies itself with us in our quest for liberation of determination.

Now the question arises: Are there models and methods which permit the manipulation of natural things in such a way that they become "others", and not "cultural objects"? If yes, the commitment to work can be indeed a liberation effort. If not, all commitment to culture remains problematic. At present the answer to the question seems to be "yes", because we seem to dispose of both such models and such methods. The ^{models} methods are provided by cybernetics, and the methods by an advanced technology, especially in the field of what is now called "software". The result of manipulations of natural things according to such models and with such methods are phenomena of the type "computer" and "electronic turtle". Such phenomena have many characteristics of "others", in the sense that we can become related to them through a dialogical structure. But an analysis of these phenomena will show that their dialogical function masks a typical "objective" reaction. They are cultural objects which simulate "others". This mask, this simulation, may result in an even more efficient determining effect such objects exert upon us, because it makes it more difficult for us to "see through" such objects and thus liberate ourselves from them. So that the answer "no" to our question looms like a desperate black cloud on our horizon. The quest for freedom seems to be an absurd one, both in the field of nature and of culture.

But the quest for freedom is somehow inborn in man, and his refusal to accept determination and assume himself as a free being somehow defines man as being opposed to both the nature he finds himself in and the culture that surrounds him. Inside the coordinates within which the problem of freedom was proposed in this paper, the refusal to accept determination takes this form: There must be models and methods which permit the manipulation of things of nature to change them into "others". This is the way Tsai puts the problem, and it is an ethical collocation. But, for him, such a categorical imperative takes the form of a question: What is wrong with the models of cybernetics, and with the methods of advanced technology, which seem to approach a solution of the problem? Why do these models and methods fail to free us? It cannot be that they are entirely wrong, because they provide the only models and methods which seem to point to a solution of the problem. And nonetheless they result in especially dangerous determining objects. Where did they go astray, and is it possible to correct the error? This sort of question, (which is an "artistic" reformulation of an ethical imperative), motivates all of Tsai's efforts, and a phenomenological analysis of his works will reveal it.

Let us put the question more clearly. We know from life experience what a "thing" is. For instance a stone; it makes me stumble. And we know from life experience what an "other" is. For instance the woman I love; I make life "projects" together with her. But those are extreme cases. There are many in-between cases which make distinctions between "thing" and "other" a doubtful endeavor. For instance a tree it makes me stumble like the stone, but nonetheless I can recognize vaguely a life project in it. It is, of course, a "thing"; my recognition is not strong enough to establish a dialogue with it. But still, it is a "thing" with certain reservations. And for instance a bank teller. I recognize a life project within him, and the recognition is strong enough to establish a dialogue with him. But during the process of my life the bank teller stands there and makes me stumble. Although theoretically he is "other", (in all theories which are humanistic), he is a "thing" in my existential praxis; he determines me and I must try to remove him. Can it not be that the models of cybernetics and the methods of advanced technology went astray, because they attack the problem from the wrong side? That they have "the woman I love" as a model, but result only in "bank tellers", and in those only insofar as their "thing" aspect is concerned? Can one not be more successful, if one is more humble and starts from the other side of the "thing-other" series, by taking, not "the woman I love", but "the tree" for a model? Should one not distill the "otherness" out of the "thingness" in careful steps, instead of trying to simulate it in a pure state? Now if the question is formulated this way, a whole series of rather surprising implications emerge. It is a great merit of Tsai, irrespective of all other aspects of his work, to have given rise to them.

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One such implication is that there are many degrees of dialogue, and that dialogue is conducted on many levels. For instance: I can establish a high degree of dialogue with a dog on the level of a certain type of emotion, but no dialogue at all on the level of philosophical problems. Or: I can establish a high degree of dialogue with a Polish art critic on the level of esthetic problems, but if that dialogue goes on in print and if I have never met the critic, I can establish no dialogue with him on other levels. Which means that existentially the dog is my "other" in a higher degree than is the Polish critic, and that existentially the Polish critic is a "thing" for me. And which means that on a theoretical level the dog is a "thing" for me, and the Polish critic "my other". And this again suggests what went wrong with cybernetics, and what Tsai is doing. Cybernetics try to establish dialogue on intellectual levels with phenomena which are typical "things" on an existential level. This is why they are existentially determinating. And Tsai tries to establish dialogue with phenomena on a few specifically existential levels. This is why these phenomena, (Tsai's "works"), are "our others" on those few existential levels, while remaining "things" on all intellectual and many existential levels. And this is also why Tsai's works do liberate us on those few existential levels.

Another such implication of the "thing-other" series is the great variety of climates in which dialogue goes on. My dialogue with a small child goes on in a climate different from the one in which my dialogue with my political enemy goes on, and my dialogue with Kant goes on in a different climate from the one in which my dialogue with my dog goes on. Now it is very difficult to attempt to catalogue such climates, (although it might be possible to order them as far as their intensity is concerned). But one specific climate stands out for Tsai, and it may be called the "playful" climate. It stands out for him, because to him it is the "esthetic" climate. (Much more will have to be said about this later in this paper.) It can be said that cybernetics try to establish dialogue in the sterile climate of "problem solving", which is no true dialogical climate. It is appropriate to the "action-reaction" structure of the relationship between man and object. And Tsai tries to establish dialogues in that "ludic" climate which is appropriate to one type of esthetic relationship between man and his other. Therefore the climate in which the cybernetic objects are found marks them as the "things" they are, whilst the climate in which Tsai's works are found marks them in a playful way as "our others".

A third implication of the "thing-other" series is the "Gestalt" in which we perceive a phenomenon to be, or not to be, our "other". A phenomenon is recognized to be my "other" to the extent to which I can recognize my own "Gestalt" in it. Now we must be careful not to confuse this "Gestalt" with the forms and the functions of our body. I can recognize Kafka as my "other", not because I recognize my body and its functions in the books written by him, but because I recognize in those books the "Gestalt" of my own thinking. I recognize my "Gestalt"

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better in my dog than in a chimpanzee I see in a zoo, although of course the chimpanzee's body and movements are more similar than the dog's to my own ones. This is so, because I recognize in the dog "Gestalt" a cultural element, ("domestication"), which lacks in the chimpanzee, but which, within my own "Gestalt", is present. I recognize my own "Gestalt" better in a tree than in a snake, although of course anatomically the snake approaches my own "Gestalt" far closer. Now this "Gestalt" factor in the recognition of a phenomenon as "my other" is very complex, as it includes physical, psychical, intellectual, and many other dimensions. Simulations of man, (like the mechanical man of the 18th century or Capek's "robots"), are ridiculous, because they copy very rudimentary aspects of our own "Gestalt", whilst revealing a mechanical "Gestalt" totally foreign to us. We can never recognize them as "others", although we feel the effort to simulate us behind them. Now something very similar to this happens with the objects of cybernetics. Although they reveal "Gestalten" much more profoundly similar to our own, (for instance computers reveal the logical "Gestalt" which characterizes much of our thinking), they still reveal aspects of "Gestalten", (apparatus aspects), which are totally foreign to our own "Gestalten". This is why we cannot recognize them to be our "others". Unless, of course, we establish an "action-reaction" relationship with them and thus allow ourselves to be changed by them according to the models which hide them ^{behind}. In that case we shall acquire a computer-like "Gestalt", but the computer will never acquire a "human" "Gestalt" in the present sense of the term. But Tsai's works reveal very poor and simple "Gestalten", (plantlike and very low animal-like "Gestalten"). We recognize all of these "Gestalten" to be included within our own, and in this very primitive way we recognize them to be our "others". Of course, we fail to recognize within his works most of the important aspects of our own "Gestalt", and in this sense we can never mistake his works to our "others". But they do not strike us (as computers do) to be dangerous simulations of our own "Gestalt", but as very primitive and innocent approximations of our own "Gestalten". This is why we can accept them as primitive "would-be-others", while we must refuse, in a sort of self-defense, such a status to snake and computers.

There are very many implications arising from the series "thing-other", but the three implications mentioned must suffice for the purpose of this paper. They must suffice to open an approach to the understanding of Tsai's efforts. He tries to use the models of cybernetics, and the methods of advanced technology to attack the series "thing-other", not from the side of the "other", but from the side of "thing", in order to approach, step by step, the "other". This is why he creates low-level existential dialogue, a playful climate, and very simple, schematically botanical "Gestalten". Unless we understand the drive behind Tsai's work, the drive in the direction of the "other" as a result of manipulation of natural things, (as liberation), we fail to understand what he is doing.

From what was said in the preceding paragraphs it is obvious what Tsai is making are "works of art" in the broad sense of the term. But it is not quite so obvious whether what he is making are "objects of culture". This is so because the phenomena he is producing are pieces of nature manipulated by the methods of advanced technology according to cybernetic models which aims at confusing the distinction between "objects" and "others". In fact, Tsai's phenomena are early examples of works which are no longer "objects" in a very strict sense of the term. They are objects with some characteristics usually associated with "others". In other words, they are objects which present an initial stage of a revolution in our cultural surroundings. A revolution which, if successful, will result in a new type of cultural surroundings. A cultural surroundings in which it will be possible to distinguish cultural objects from artificial "others". In fact, their being an initial stage of a revolution explains in part the fascination Tsai's works exert on their beholders. They provoke a dialogical attitude in the beholder, which means that they provoke an attitude which the beholder feels will characterize a future cultural situation. In beginning to dialogue with Tsai's works the beholder sees through them into a future populated by the fantastic presence of artificial others. This is the most important result of a phenomenological analysis of Tsai's works; it reveals a specific, (and fantastic), future of culture behind them.

Now it is within the context of this type of futurology that the important question must be asked: Are Tsai's works "works of art" in the very strict sense of the term? The question is very important, not because it concerns the quality of the experience those works provide us here and now, but because it concerns also the quality of experience the future proposed by those works will provide us. The question concerns therefore a possible future "human being-in-the-world". It is no question of labelling Tsai's works "art" or giving them another sort of label. Such sort of question could be dismissed as merely formal. It is, on the contrary, a question which throws a penetrating light on the problem of "artistic versus artificial" in a revolutionary context. It therefore provokes not only purely esthetic, but even more so ethical and religious problems. This paper will try to point out a few possible answer to the question.

A superficial way to answer the question would be as follows: Tsai's works give me pleasure, they fascinate me, and therefore I like them. And since I am accustomed to associate this sort of experience with works of art in the strict sense of the term, Tsai's works are works of art in this sense. Let us call this type of answer a "subjective" answer. It is however a highly unsatisfactory type of answer, and were it only for the fact that we cannot rest satisfied with a merely subjective approach to the phenomenon of art, which is after all an important dimension of the cultural, (and therefore intersubjective), situation.

Tsai's own answer to the question, (as it reveals itself through analysis of his works), goes approximately as follows: a work of art in the strict sense of the term is a phenomenon which communicates a specific kind of experience to the receiver of its message. This kind of experience can be called "ludical" experience, in the sense that it goes on on the ontological level of playful make-believe, not on the ontological level of the animal seriousness which the concrete reality imposes. It is through communicating such a play experience that a phenomenon liberates man from the sad oppression of concrete everyday reality, and it is in this sense also that such a phenomenon is a work of art in the strict sense of the term. This does not imply, necessarily, that playful experience is less fundamental than the experience of concrete reality, but it may imply, on the contrary, that to be capable of having playful experience is fundamentally human. It is for this reason, (for being permanently inserted in concrete reality), that animals have no art, and that man can have it. Such a sort of answer, implicit in Tsai's works, has an explicit and very impressing tradition. One can quote, in this connection, the names of Schiller and Nietzsche, as well as many others. There can be no doubt that Tsai's works are strictly works of art, if we accept this sort of answer to our question. They not only communicate a playful experience, they propose a playful dialogue and thus make the receiver believe that he has found, (within a game), his "other". In other words: Tsai's phenomena are strictly works of art, because they provoke the playful discovery of an "other".

Another type of answer to the question, (and an even more adequate one to Tsai's phenomena than the one just mentioned), might go on as follows: a work of art in the strict sense of the term is the public articulation of a "dream", namely of a previously private model. It is an objectivation of what was, previous to its production, a subjective experience of its author. Now there are two types of dreams: the alienating dream which refuses reality and tries to run away from it, and the visionary dream which imagines how reality should be. Works of art are phenomena which articulate publicly the second type of dream, and thus powerfully contribute to the changing of the world. It is in this sense that works of art in the strict sense represent the "avant-garde" of progress. Now there can be no doubt that Tsai's phenomena are works of art in this sense. They are "avant-garde", because they propose to change the world in accordance with a dream Tsai has, and because this dream of Tsai's although private, is in accordance with the "spirit of our times", and therefore "objectively" points to the future. In fact: Tsai's dream is so closely in agreement with spirit of our times, that we can see through his phenomena a very possible future. In this sense Tsai's phenomena are not only works of art in a very strict sense of the term, but also prophetic revelations of the future. They are "true" in this sense, which is the sense of Marxism and other dialectical analyses: they overcome ideologies by praxis.

Yes, but there is yet another way to answer the question. It may be formulated as follows: A work of art in the strict sense of the term is a phenomenon which communicates the experience of some hidden reality to the receiver of its message. If defined this way, the work of art is conceived of as a revealing and dis-alienating factor. In fact, it is conceived of as the revealing and the dis-alienating factor in our surroundings. It is thanks to art, and only thanks to art, that we are always being re-inserted in the soil of concrete experience, covered up by dense layers of pretense, make-believe and simple lying which is being constantly deposited on concrete experience by the various agents of our cultural situation. Art, in this view, is our only window on concrete experience, and this is its beauty. Art is beautiful, because it allows the concrete experience to "shine through", ("epiphainein"), thick layers of artificiality which characterizes our cultural situation. In this sense art is the exact contrary of artifice, and artistic the exact contrary of artificial. Art is "true", in this sense, if it penetrates artifice, and without art all of us would be victims to the alienating artifices of culture. The role of the artist, in this conception, is to explode artificial ideologies and reveal to us what is "real" behind them.

Can it be said that Tsai's phenomena are works of art in this sense of the definition? Here is what the phenomena themselves seem to answer: Yes, because we explode the "artificiality" of cybernetic objects and show them to be masks of "others". This is why we are strictly works of art, and the technological objects of cybernetics, like computers, are not. But, unfortunately, we cannot rest satisfied with this answer, and the reasons for our dissatisfaction go very deep, down to the roots of Western civilisation. For Western tradition, (for what is called "Judeo-christian" tradition), the only valid experience of the world is the human experience of the world. Man, within that tradition, occupies a very specific place, namely the place of the subject that experiences the world. There is no other being that can occupy that place: no plant, no animal, and, strictly speaking, no other type of "spirit". This is why Judeo-christian tradition refuses to admit "souls" to animals and plants, why it is so restrictively humanistic. Now this results, among other things, in a specifically Occidental approach to the work of art as a factor of dis-alienating revelation. What reveals itself in the work of art, (for the Occidental), is the specifically human concrete experience of its author. The work of art is a means to discover the author behind it, his concrete experience, his action and suffering, and to recognize oneself in it. The work of art is a means to discover a concrete human "other" behind it, and it is in this sense that it is beautiful and revealing. Because the only concrete experience of the "other" Western tradition conceives of is this sort of sympathy, called "love" in religious contexts.

Now, if the present analysis of Tsai's phenomena is at all

correct, they are directly opposed to Western tradition, both in the wide sense of allocating a specific place to man, and in the specific sense of conceiving the work of art as a revelation of its author. They are opposed to the tradition in the wide sense, because they propose a dialogue with what can never, for the tradition, be a "true other". And they are opposed to it in a specific sense, because they propose to the beholder, not to discover Tsai and his concrete experience of the world behind them, but to discover a new type of "other" behind them. In this, traditionally Western sense, they are "artifice", and not "works of art" in the strict sense of the term. They do not reveal a "true other", but they propose an "artificial other". To speak religiously, they are idolatrous proposals. To speak ethically, they propose a type of relationship with the "other" not recognized as valid by Western tradition. To speak esthetically, they do not reveal reality, (in the Western sense of "concrete human experience"), but cover it up by proposing an artificial experience in its place. This is the deep reason why the answer they give to our question cannot satisfy us.

Possibly Tsai himself does not stand within Western tradition. The analysis of his phenomena seems to reveal this. In that case the arguments just advanced cannot touch him. Possibly he stands within an Oriental tradition, for which, (so at least it looks like to a Western observer), man is not a being radically separated from all others. For such a tradition man may feel deeply united with animals, plants, and other types of beings. He can therefore conceive of them much more as of "others" than we can. And the phenomena Tsai produces are then, in their naive, plant-like "Gestalten", "true others". If I can dialogue with a plant, (and Oriental tradition seems to suggest this), then "a fortiori", can I dialogue with the phenomena Tsai is producing. Such an hypothesis of Tsai's position would explain his approach to the problem posed by the series "thing-other". He could then still see others, (even in a stone), where we no longer can see them. In this case Tsai may say that his is an important Oriental contribution to the Western (and bankrupt) attempt to free man from the determining effects of objects of culture. He may say that he is using Western models and Western methods from an Oriental approach, in order to try and solve the universally human problem of freedom from determination. And he will be completely correct in thus answering the above advanced objections.

It is one of the terrible aspects of human condition that such an answer, even if we know it to be correct, cannot satisfy us. The reason for this goes equally deep and can be stated as follows: there is, within Western tradition, a powerful underground current, (probably more ancient than the tradition itself), which can be called "Promethean", or "Faustic". For this current the problem of freedom from determination poses itself as the problem of opposing human artifice to determination. Within this current phenomena are produced, (like the statue of Pygmalion, and Faust's Homunculus, and Franken-

stein's monsters, and Rabbi Low's Golem, and possibly computers), which are deliberate simulations of "others. Of course, they are entirely different from Tsai's proposals. They are different in that they intend deliberately to be simulations, and in that they intend, more or less deliberately, to destroy what for the official Western tradition are the "true Others". Like the whole underground current they come from, they are phenomena of contestation. Theirs is a tradition of rebellion. Now although Tsai's phenomena may come from an entirely different tradition, and certainly do aim deliberately at freeing man from determination in a sense opposed to the "Faustic" current, they must be engulfed in the "Faustic" current, once they penetrate the Western context. Therefore the fantastic future peopled by artificial "others" which we see through Tsai's phenomena, must be, within the Western context, a future peopled by Frankenstein's monsters, inspite of the phenomena themselves, and inspite of Tsai's intentions. In this is the deep reason why for a Western receiver of their message they cannot be, in this sense works of art, but artifices. One is almost tempted to say: "diabolical artifices". Which is, of course, no esthetic criticism at all, but may be, on the contrary, high esthetic tribute.

To see these deep abysses behind such pleasant, playful and innocent phenomena as Tsai's is a proof of their mysterious fascination. The concrete experience they communicate is, if sufficiently considered, the concrete experience of "Godlike man", of man giving rise to "creating", another one like him. There can be no doubt that Tsai's phenomena, (whether they be works of art in the strict sense, or whether they be fantastic artifices), are extremely important. They show what promises and dangers may inher in a "play", if it is proposed by a great artist. Because, even if Tsai's phenomena be considered artifices, there can be no doubt that Tsai is a great artist. Not because what he does is pleasant, or because he proposes a play, or because he represents the spirit of our times, but because he reveals to us, through artifice or works of art, the concrete experience of a future full of promise or abysmal danger. And this concrete experience is his own, and we can recognize ourselves in it. And so, since we are desperately determined by Western tradition, we establish with him that relationship of sympathy which is the only one recognized as valid by Western tradition. We become two projects that run parallel in the direction of the possibly absurd aim of liberation from determination.

TSAI'S PHENOMENA ARE WIRY ROOM FILLING STRUCTURES RECALLING BOTANICAL STRUCTURES WHICH RESPOND TO LIGHT, SOUND AND TOUCH IN GRACEFUL LIFELIKE MOVEMENTS THAT CANNOT BE FORESEEN BY THOSE WHO PLAY WITH THEM.

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