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The Invisible Struggle of Tsang Kin-Wah

Stella Fong

No exhibition has been as difficult and demanding as working with Tsang Kin-Wah, who I worked with for the Venice Biennale in 2015. A naturally quiet person, he was open and unreserved during our discussions, sharing the conflicts and struggles he encounters as he creates. I was moved by his honesty, and learned immensely throughout the process. I have never met another artist who considers art his entirety.

I have known Tsang for over a decade, and have always appreciated his focused, diligent, and meticulous working attitude. He began to contemplate and question the meaning of life, having come upon Nietzsche's philosophy gone through a rough patch in 2009. He became reserved, leading a life not unlike that of a hermit. He avoided public appearances, rarely attended exhibition openings, and only occasionally agreed to interviews or allowed himself to be photographed, appearing only as the shadow cast in documentation of his work. He became an invisible artist.

Perhaps because of hardship, his background, or the influence of philosophical and religious ideas, Tsang has always tended to take his views to polar extremes, leading him into a state of self-contradiction. This calls to mind the Chariot Allegory of Plato's Phaedrus, which Tsang has referenced in his work. Plato taught that we should use reason and intellect in the pursuit of happiness and well-being, likening it to a man driving a chariot with a black and white horse at the reins, the two horses representing conflicting sentiments or emotions (the black horse and the white horse represent irrational passions and rational morality, respectively). I often wonder if Tsang strives to control these two horses, or allows them to charge down their own paths. To have a better understanding of his practice, we need to delve into his upbringing, background, experience, personality, and even his emotional state, all of which inform and inspire the hidden context of his work.

Tsang was born in Shantou in 1977, and moved to Hong Kong in 1982. At the time, his parent recorded his date of birth incorrectly, and he uses that incorrect date to this day. I am not surprised that Tsang would take this to his heart, given his rigorous personality. After arriving in Hong Kong, he discovered that locals referred to people from Guangdong as "mainlanders," reserving the term "Hong Kongers" for those born in Hong Kong. His return to Hong Kong from studying at university in England coincided with a new travel policy by which residents of China were allowed to travel in Hong Kong independently after a simple travel permit process. Mainlanders were suddenly quite welcome in Hong Kong. This inspired the work *Untitled: Hong Kong*

(2003–2004), which explores the tensions between mainland China and Hong Kong since the handover in 1997. The work reflects on the uncertainty of identity, and considers the ways mainlanders and Hong Kongers perceive each other. Having grown up in an environment of muddled identity, Tsang has never known exactly who he was. Moving to Hong Kong at the age of five, he was not a true local Hong Konger, nor could he call himself an artist from China. This ambiguous upbringing must bear some relation to his later examination of contradictions and confusions.

Early on, in his graduation piece, *Interior* (2003), completed in England, Tsang already began to examine discrepancies between surface and interior. The surface may seem quite beautiful but, when the viewer draws closer, it is the opposite. This is inextricably linked to his experiences in England. While pursuing a master's degree in book arts in London, Tsang encountered rudeness and racism. His first impression of England was of a beautiful country with gracious and courteous people, but he gradually came to discover how they used politeness as a crafty way of being rude. Tsang found inspiration in the natural compositions of William Morris, using distorted text to create beautiful floral patterns. Since 2003, he began a series of image and text installations that examine issues regarding human nature. *Interior*, a collage of profanities, is an early work in this direction. The artwork fills the walls of the exhibition space with beautiful floral patterns, which, upon closer inspection, are entirely composed of sarcastic, provocative, and vulgar words and phrases. This intentional contrast instantly transforms a tranquil, elegant space into an atmosphere of hatred and bitterness, reflecting the artist's unpleasant experiences and anger of the time.

The White Porn series (2008) continued Tsang's exploration of the discrepancies between surface and interior. Though these works differed from his past combinations of flower patterns and texts, he still combined two opposing concepts, this time purity and filth, into the same painting. Tsang was raised in a traditional household and was educated in a Christian setting. He observed that the vast majority of people viewed obscene materials online regardless of their supposedly stringent views on sex, inspiring a series of works exploring inborn desires, tensions with social taboos, and the conflicts between them that arise. In this series, he painted pornographic images in white paint against a white background, depicting scenes of masturbation, sexual intercourse, and sadistic abuse in a reserved manner. The white surface has a feeling of purity and innocence, yet conceals unabashed fantasy and lust. Through this pure white monochrome series, he examines his skepticism about human desire and

rational restraint, criticizing tendencies to see sex as filthy and shameful.

Aside from filling the walls with curses, Tsang deliberately plays with self-contradiction as he engages in bold and incisive criticism of the art market, the art system, gallery owners, materialism, and the values of the art. In the White Cube series (2005), created for a solo exhibition at a commercial gallery in Hong Kong, a series of white images are woven together with crude phrases in Chinese and English cursing key players in the art system, including collectors, buyers, dealers, and even the gallery owner. One passage reads: "Fucking art made by the fucking people and for the fucking people, a joy to the fucking maker and the fucking user." Many of the works presented in the exhibition were marked at astronomical prices in a commentary on the arbitrary pricing system of art. He does not want to follow the art market completely, but is also aware of how it can add value. In the end, his works were rapidly absorbed by the market and returned to a state of consumption. This left him at a loss. He can only strive to control the consumption of his work as much as possible to avoid the dilution of its critical power.

The year 2009 was a low point in the artist's life, a time of awakening and a major turning point during which he created many outstanding artworks. He went from being a Christian to believing in Nietzsche, who declared the death of God. This transition was marked by deep skepticism about his own faith and existence. He began a series of seven digital video and sound installations titled "Seven Seals" (2009–ongoing), based on the "Book of Revelation" from the Bible. To date, he has completed the first six seals: *The First Seal: It Would Be Better If You Have Never Been Born...* (2009); *The Second Seal: Every Being That Opposes Progress Should Be Food For You* (2009); *The Third Seal: They Are Already Old. They Don't Need To Exist Anymore* (2009); *The Fourth Seal: HE Is To No Purpose And HE Wants To Die For The Second Time* (2010); *The Fifth Seal: HE Shall Deliver You Up To Be Afflicted And Killed As HE WAS* (2011); and *The Sixth Seal: HE Is Something That Should Be Overcome. You Are Something That Should Be Overcome* (2014). The work is connected to millenarian prophecies and incorporates various philosophical ideas, political events, and religious and personal insights and struggles, bringing his thoughts about faith, existentialism, and metaphysics to a new level. The texts are based on Biblical passages linked with other texts and data to create diverging connotations. Digital technology is used to create undulating waves of words that appear intermittently throughout the exhibition space, an atmosphere that is at once oddly serene and unsettling. Aside from the heavy religious tone of the series, existing notions are smashed and replaced by new ideas in a dialectic cycle. Tsang

has discovered that some of his own thoughts and words follow this model. As he was filled with doubt, he collapsed and yearned for a foundation. That foundation turned out to be Xun Kuang's conviction that man is evil by nature. Coincidentally, this belief that darkness lies at the root of human nature subtly echoes the concept of original sin in Christianity.

Tsang's work for the Hong Kong pavilion at the Venice Biennale, *The Infinite Nothing* (2015), consists of four video projections that continue his explorations of religion and philosophy. The title is derived from a passage in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*: "Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space?" The work opens with video of a ceaselessly flowing river, emphasizing that all things are in a state of constant change and revealing that life seems to be a constant cycle of self-discovery, generation, and disintegration, in which the end point is precisely the futile essence of nothingness from which it all began. It brings Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return to life before our eyes. Tsang follows this core idea through a series of metaphors and allegories of philosophical ideas, religious icons, and elements of pop culture. The work also draws its main inspiration from another theory of Nietzsche's, that of the "Übermensch"—of man constantly transcending himself to reach an ideal state—which, to a certain extent, reflects the artist's personal cosmic view. Tsang believes that, since man's inherent nature is evil, we must strive to overcome our shortcomings and our evil nature. His works advocate positive self-improvement and the embrace of the contemporary spirit, despite the fact that he is pessimistic about life.

Art is life, day after day, year in and year out. Life may be short, but, for Tsang, it seems to go on for a very long time. Viewing his work is like listening in as the artist murmurs to himself about his ongoing struggles with existence, his frustration and helplessness with the absurdity of it all. His compulsively doubtful personality leads his work from a calm expression of dissatisfaction to the exploration of discrepancies and tensions between surface and interior, from self-criticism to the dilemma between conflicting artistic beliefs and worldviews. Through his works, he carries out constant self-reflection and, at the same time, reminds viewers that he still clings tenaciously to life. For him, things are largely meaningless. Only the satisfaction derived from his work can allow him to forget this harsh reality, even if only briefly. This draws me back to that river in *The Infinite Nothing*. As Tsang quotes Heraclitus to remind us: "You cannot step into the same river twice," because nothing is eternal. If life is full of contradiction and struggle, then when he steps into and out of the river again, will this still be the case? (Translated by Jeff Crosby)



Interior
2003
Silkscreen and acrylic on paper
Dimensions variable

《Interior》
2003年
纸上丝印
尺寸可变

看不见的挣扎： 曾建华

方咏甄

我曾合作过的艺术家有很多，不论是在展览策划、书册编纂和举办教育活动方面。2015年我有幸参与筹划威尼斯双年展，在过程中，跟曾建华的合作相信是最艰难和费力的。我从未遇过一位艺术家，创作就是他生命的全部。他虽然比较沉静，但当讨论时，却会敞开心扉，毫不保留地分享创作中所遇到的矛盾和挣扎，这着实令人感动，也让我获益良多。

跟曾建华相识超过十载，欣赏他做事专注、认真和一丝不苟。2009年他经历人生的低潮，并受到尼采思想的影响，时常思考生存的意义。此后他变得相当低调，过着犹如隐士般的生活，他甚少在公众场合露面，更鲜有出席展览开幕，接受访问和拍照。他只会把自己的背影投放到作品的记录之中，可算是一位“看不见”的艺术家。

或许是人生经历过挫折；或许是成长背景的关系；又或许是自小受东、西方的哲学和不同宗教的思想所影响，令曾建华对事情的看法往往偏向两极，常常陷入自我矛盾的状态。这令我想起他在作品中曾引述柏拉图在《斐德若篇》的“战车寓言”——柏拉图教导人们应以理性和智慧去追寻幸福和快乐，就好像手握马缰操控战车的人，操控黑、白两匹分别象征两种互相抗衡的情绪或感情的马（黑马与白马分别象征非理性的情欲与理性的道德），带领战车往前直奔。我常问着，究竟曾建华是拼尽全力去操控这两匹马，还是任由它俩各走各路？若要探究他的艺术实践，除了要了解其创作理念，更需要探究他的成长背景、经历、性格，甚至当下的情绪，因为这样才能深入明白作品隐藏的脉络。

曾建华1977年于中国汕头出生，于1982年移居香港。当时父母误填了他的出生年、月、日，并一直沿用至今。对于向来严谨的他来说，相信总会有点耿耿于怀。来港后，他渐渐发现香港人会将内地移民称为“大陆仔”。而所谓香港人就只限于本地出生的人。当他在英国毕业后回港，刚巧香港实施“自由行”政策，即中国居民可透过简单的签证手续以个人身份来港旅游。那阵子大陆人突然很受香港人欢迎，令曾建华创作了作品《无题——香港》（2003至2004年），探讨1997年英国将政权移交中国后，内地和香港的矛盾，并对身份的不确定性作出质疑和反思，思考大陆人和香港人如何看待对方。因自小便活在充满错乱的身份环境中，曾建华也分不清自己是什么人。他五岁来港生活，并不是土生土长的香港人，但他也不会说自己是来自中国的艺术家。而这种模棱两可的成长背景，与他往后的创作常常审视生活中的矛盾和无奈大概不无关系。

早期于英国的毕业作品《Interior》（2003）年中，曾建华便开始呈现出表里不一的创作风格，即外表很漂亮的东西，当近观却是恰恰相反，这跟他在英国的经历有着密切的关系。当他留学伦敦修读书艺硕士期间，经历了一些不礼貌的对待和种族歧视，积压了很多情绪。初时他看到的英国很美，也觉得当地人很友善。后来渐渐发现他们很会巧妙地运用措辞，有礼貌地表达不礼貌，令他觉得英国人很虚伪。曾建华从威廉·莫里斯的大自然图案取得灵感，以扭曲变形的文字构成外表优美的花纹图案。自2003年起，他创作了一系列图案和文字的装置，反复探讨人性的议题。《Interior》就是其中一件以粗言秽语拼凑而成的早期创作。作品满布整个展览空间的墙壁，当观众近距离欣赏时，便会发现那些形态美观的花卉图案，是由充满嘲讽和挑衅性的粗俗文字所构成。这种刻意的反差，把原有宁静优雅的空间，顿时转化为弥漫着怨恨和尖锐刻薄气氛的环境。透过不协调的表达方法，反映出他当时的不快经历和愤怒情绪。

《白色情》（2008年）系列大概是曾建华探讨表里不一的艺术体现的延续。虽然有别于他过往花卉形状的文字装置，却把“纯洁”和“污秽”两种对立的概念呈现于同一画面上。他在传统的家庭环境长大，于基督教学校接受教育。他认为即使人们对性的想法多么保守，但也会浏览网络的色情信息。在思考这些问题的期间，启发了他

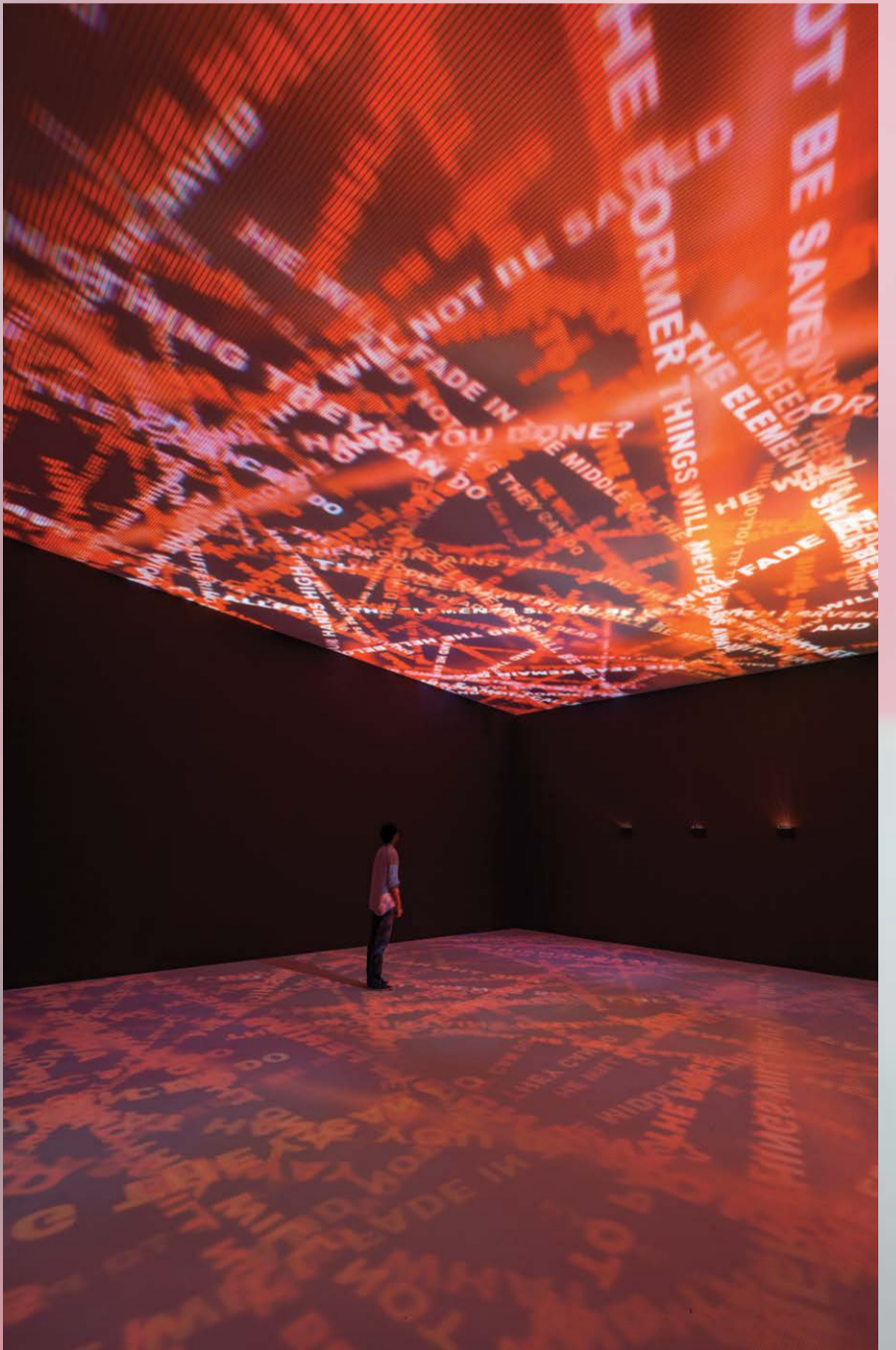
以一系列作品探讨人类与生俱来的欲望，与社会禁忌之间的张力和所引发的冲突。以白色颜料在白色画布上绘画各式各样的色情场面，低调地展示各种自渎、性交与性虐待场景。白色表面上予人一种纯洁无邪的感觉，却隐藏着露骨的性幻想及欲望。他借着这个“纯洁”的单体系列，审视他对人性情欲与理性禁忌的疑问，批评社会的性观念以及部分人将性视为污秽与羞耻的偏见。

曾建华的作品除了那充满骂人语句的墙纸装置，亦刻意玩弄自相矛盾，对艺术市场、体制、画廊老板、物质主义以至价值观作出大胆和辛辣的批评。例如他在香港商业画廊举办的个人展览展出的作品《白立方》（2005年），一系列的作品以中、英文写满挑衅性的粗言秽语构成的白色图像，嘲讽和咒骂艺术体系的主要成员，包括收藏家、买家、经纪，甚至画廊老板。就像作品中的一句“Fucking art made by the fucking people and for the fucking people, a joy to the fucking maker and the fucking user”。此外，多幅陈列的画作都标明为天价，并且附上价目表，在展场实时公开发售，以讽刺艺术商品的任意标价制度。他虽然不希望完全顺从艺术市场，但又意识到它会为作品或自己增值。最终，他的作品被市场迅速吸纳，又返回被消费的状态。这种情况令他颇为困扰，甚至无所适从。所以他只会能力控制范围内，去控制作品被吸纳的状况，尽量避免削弱作品原有的批判力量。

2009年，曾建华正处于人生的低潮，是他生命中的自我觉醒期，也是创作历程上很大的转折点，造就了很多精彩的作品。当时他由信奉基督教，转向相信宣称上帝已死的尼采；由不相信特定的宗教，以至把尼采的哲学视为宗教般，对自己的信仰和存在有很大的疑问。他根据《圣经》启示录创作《七封印》（2009年至今）的一组七件数码录像及声音装置系列，现已完成当中六件作品，包括《The First Seal: It Would Be Better If You Have Never Been Born...》（2009年）、《The Second Seal: Every Being That Opposes Progress Should Be Food For You》（2009年）、《The Third Seal: They Are Already Old. They Don't Need to Exist Anymore》（2009年）、《The Fourth Seal: HE Is To No Purpose And HE Wants To Die For The Second Time》（2010年）、《The Fifth Seal: HE Shall Deliver You Up To Be Afflicted And Killed As HE WAS》（2011年）、及《The Six Seal: HE Is Something That Should be Overcome. You Are Something That Should Be Overcome.》（2014年）。作品与预言有关末世会发生的不同事件有关，结合不同的哲学思想、政治事件、宗教及他的个人见解和挣扎，把他对信仰、存在主义与形而上学的思考带到另一层次。当中的文字以《圣经》经文作框架，然后把当中不同指涉的句子，与其他文本的数据或自己编写的文字链接起来。作品透过计算机技术，以不同的状态和规律展现波浪形在滑行的文字，时隐时而现的投射在展场内。录像中营造异常平静但又带点令人惴惴不安的冷峻气氛。此系列作品除充满浓厚的宗教色彩外，亦包含两股不同力量的冲突—旧有的观念被打破，被新的理念所推翻和取代，以辩证的方式不停循环。这种信念对曾建华的创作有深远的影响，他甚至发现自己的某些思想言行也遵从此模式。例如此刻他认同自己的所做所想，随即又会开始质疑。当所有事情都变得可质疑的时候，他好像有点崩溃，需要找回一个基础。对他而言，那个基础正是荀子的“性本恶”。而这种相信人本性是充满黑暗面的看法，与他抗衡的基督教系统所说的“原罪”恰巧又互相呼应。

曾建华参与威尼斯双年展的作品《无尽虚无》（2015年），是一组四件的录像投射，延续他对宗教与哲学的探索。作品名称《无尽虚无》取自尼采《快乐的科学》（1882年）书中一段引文，宣示上帝之死的声明：“穿越无尽虚无时，难道我们不也在迷失吗？难道我们感受不到虚空的吐息吗？”作品以一条川流不息的河流影像揭开序幕，强调一切事物都处于不断变化中，揭示生命仿佛自我发现、衍生与解体的永恒循环的旅程，以及终点正是起点那种徒劳与虚无的本质，令尼采“永劫

回归”这概念得以活现观众的眼前。曾建华环绕这个核心思想，结合一系列以隐喻和寓言陈述的哲学概念，以及不同的宗教符号和流行文化元素。作品又以尼采的另一概念“超人论”（德语原文为bermensch）为主要灵感来源——指人不断超越自我、最终达到的理想境界，某种程度上反映着艺术家自己的人生观和世界观。他相信超人代表一个可能无法达到的目标，却为生命中不断推动自己、改进自己的提醒。因为人性本恶，所以要借此克服自己的缺点与邪恶的本性。他在创作上虽然主张积极改善自我，拥抱当下的精神，惟生活上他却是较消极和悲观，这矛盾的心态形成了他创作和生活之间的很大落差。艺术即是生活，日复日，年复年。虽说生命多短暂，但对曾建华来说，或许是漫漫长路。观看他的作品时，仿佛会听到他在喃喃自语，感受到他对生存的挣扎，对人生种种荒谬的唏嘘和无奈。因着他几乎强迫性的质疑性格，令其创作从冷静地发泄不满情绪，到探讨表里不一的矛盾张力；从创作中进行自我批判，到后来陷入创作和人生态度之间自相矛盾的两难状态。他会透过作品不断自省，提醒观众他依旧好不容易地活着。对他而言，一切事情都没甚意义，反而艺术创作带来的满足感，或会令他可以暂时忘却这痛苦的现实，虽然这段时间相当短暂。这令我想起《无尽虚无》中的那一道河流。正如曾建华引用赫拉克利特的格言提醒我们，因着河水不断流动，“人不可能再次踏进同一水流之中”，因为没有东西是永恒的。那么，即使人生是充满矛盾和挣扎，当他再次踏进河水，会是相同的状况吗？



The Sixth Seal: HE Is Something That Should Be Overcome. You Are Something That Should Be Overcome
2014
Digital video and sound installation
6 min 36 sec
1080×810×480cm

《第六封印》
2014年
视频、声音装置
6分36秒
1080×810×480厘米