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A Conversation with Tsang Kin-Wah

Installation view of TSANG KIN-WAH's *The Fourth Seal - HE Is To No Purpose And HE Wants To Die For The Second Time*, 2010, digital video and sound installation with color, stereo sounds, dimensions variable: 6 min 25 sec, at Alchi Triennale, Alchi Arts Center, 2010. All images copyright and courtesy the artist.



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

BY DAVID HO YEUNG CHAN

Having known Tsang Kin-Wah for almost a decade, I would liken him to a devoted monk who has deserted the confines of organized religion and believes in wandering as the best way to sharpen his consciousness. Well versed in Eastern and Western philosophies and postmodern discourse, Tsang nevertheless maintains a critical distance with such intellectual enterprises, and spends time sifting through different ideas before devising the concepts for his work. Once he has locked on an idea, he begins to create in his studio in the Hong Kong suburb of Fotan, meticulously composing his haunting videos and designing spectacular floral wall-based works, all without the help of assistants.

Tsang seldom talks about the meaning behind his work, preferring to let his art speak for itself. In this interview, Tsang sheds light on the formal development of his oeuvre and his preoccupation with spirituality. Contrary to the reading of Tsang's art as an ongoing study of darkness and nihilism, I find his practice reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's 1957 play *Endgame*. To come to terms with the end is to become more honest with our physical and mental limitations as humans, and rethinking the meaning of "the terminal" is timely in the context of an increasingly unpredictable world order.

What inspired you to become an artist?

I liked drawing and painting when I was in primary school. Art was the only thing that interested me at the time, and I already wanted to become an artist as a student.

Two key moments affected my art practice. The year I spent studying in London made me realize the importance of developing a concept in the making of art. During late 2008 and early 2009, I shifted the focus of my work from addressing social issues to investigating personal, religious, and philosophical understandings of human nature, and I began to make video projections to expand the field for exploration.

Could you elaborate on the theme of human nature, which recurs throughout your work?

I have been troubled by existential issues for a long time, since going through both Confucian and Christian educations. While many believe that humans are fundamentally good in nature, I used to believe humans are inherently evil and selfish. Presently, I do not think there is a common nature to characterize humans. Some people have no conscience. People exist without a particular virtue. Some exist like animals in nature, while others take the form of human beings that are neither different nor superior to others.

During your undergraduate studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, you received training in Chinese painting, calligraphy, printmaking, and ceramics. How did you go from these disciplines to working almost exclusively with text-based and video installations?

When I started to make art, I wanted to use elements such as characters in my work. I began to write short stories and pseudo-histories, and presented them in a traditional way by means of woodblock prints, rubbings, books in Japanese-style binding. I realized gradually that creating a narrative would become my main interest. After many years of experimentation, I finally settled on using video and moving texts to create an environment for the viewer to experience.

Tell me about your early reliefs, *Super Magic Kung Fu* (2000) and *Clay . Soil . Earth & Its Spiritual Relationship with Man* (2000-02).

Super Magic Kung Fu is about the weird skills that people have to adopt for survival in society. Like Chinese kung fu, these skills are not something we are born with. We have to spend time and effort to learn them. My other ceramic works from around 2000 to 2002 deal with the spiritual and religious meanings of clay and earth, and refer to issues of life and death in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001.

You write in your statement for *Clay . Soil . Earth & Its Spiritual Relationship with Man* that "the earth is the opposite of heaven and is also the home of the dead." The work *aNYbody* (2002) is presented like a tomb, with childlike figures aligned within a wooden casket. Could you elaborate on the significance of using clay and the theme of mortality?

I carved the human figures from blocks of clay. For *aNYbody*, I pressed the carved blocks of clay onto plain ones in order to transfer the images onto a new relief surface. These two elements are presented as one with numerous figures being trapped inside. Even though the dead are buried, we can still see traces of their existence in the earth. The two wooden caskets referred to the collapse of the Twin Towers at the time I was making this work. The letters N and Y in the title imply New York. This work pays tribute to the dead from this horrible attack. It was presented as an archaeological site where the remains of the dead were to be found. This reference is not something that I want to reveal to the audience explicitly, but I invite them to ponder on the relationship between life and death on an existential level.

Your earliest text-based installation, *Untitled No.1* (2003), uses painting and printing techniques on actual wallpaper. What was the process for making this work?

This piece reflects my experience of studying in London. I was hoping to create a space that would be elegant at first sight, but in fact would express frustration, anger, and other negative emotions. I first found a pattern designed by William Morris, and then scanned it as a reference. The image was made into silkscreens by hand and then printed onto actual wallpaper that I bought. I experimented with different color combinations, but in the end I only used black to make the work less heavy.

What is the link between language and William Morris's highly decorative pattern? And why did you include foul language in this work?

As a child, I used to study the *Analects* [of Confucius]. When I was trying to write short stories, I didn't want to use classical Chinese. I wrote in another style close to it. After writing a bit, I started to question the use of this type of language, which pointed me to use more vulgar language that reflected the true emotions of normal people.

I like William Morris's emphasis on using our hands in the process of making arts and crafts. This injects the maker's own emotions into the work, something that mechanical reproductions cannot match. On one level, this runs parallel to my idea of using foul language to express my frustration and anger while I was living in the United Kingdom.

What was your earliest video work?

It was a video about distorting the original images and then transforming the copies of the original through non-digital means. The two main elements of the video are color blocks as the backdrop, and the text, which states the name of the color that



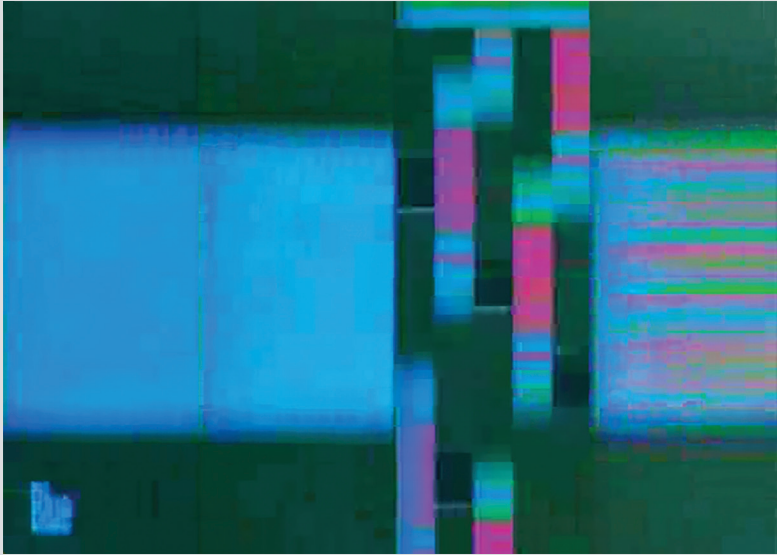
Installation view of **TSANG KIN-WAH's** *Super Magic Kung Fu*, 2000, inked stoneware plaque, 553.5×59×6.5 cm with frame, at Art Museum, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2000.



Installation view of **TSANG KIN-WAH's** *aNYbody*, 2002, inked stoneware plaque, 528×25.7×11.8 cm with frame, at the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre, 2002.



Detailed installation view of **TSANG KIN-WAH's** *Untitled No. 1*, 2003, silkscreen and acrylic on paper, 300×300 cm, at the Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong, 2003.



TSANG KIN-WAH, *Colour>Color>Col.*, 2001, still from VHS and DV with color, no sound: 5 min 10 sec.



Installation view of TSANG KIN-WAH's *Ecce Homo Trilogy I*, 2012, multichannel video with sound and text installation, dimensions variable, at Pearl Lam Galleries, Hong Kong, 2012.

moves slowly from one side to another at the bottom of the video. I first made this video on the computer and thereafter created a copy by recording it with a DV camera. The copy was then recorded and duplicated again until the final copy became completely illegible and was full of noise. Then I superimposed those copies onto one screen in order to alter the way we read the text. I made this work around 2001 when I was first exposed to video art while working at a local video art organization. I was quite eager to try something new at that time, though I did not take video art very seriously, not until *The First Seal* was made in 2009.

You made a fascinating piece titled *In the dark in the darkness* (2006), which used vinyl floor text in an enclosed space with changing light conditions. Can you elaborate on this?

This work contains only two components. First, transparent glossy vinyl texts are installed on the floor. Two spotlights that are turned on and off intermittently are placed at the corners of the room. Upon entering the space, the texts are hardly visible at first. But they emerge slowly with the light that also reflects on the entire space at the same time. It's as if the whole interior space is breathing and emotions are being revealed bit by bit to the audience. The impetus of this work has to do with a personal matter that happened in Japan that has troubled me for years. That is why this piece was shown in Japan in 2006. This work reflects my pessimistic thoughts on life in general. I had no idea what came over me, it might be related to the feeling of not being wanted as a teenager.

Tell me about *The Seven Seals* (2009-). You have already completed six of the works in this series and are working on the seventh. With reference to religion, metaphysics, and politics, the *Seals* collectively reveal different emotions and human nature as we approach the apocalypse.

The first of *The Seven Seals* is about my pessimistic view on life. This serves as the starting point and the basis for the whole series. The rest are elaborations and my personal views on life and death, past and current events from around the world, and my negative feelings toward humankind and their self-destructive behavior. In this work, the world will end, and we will be annihilated.

What was the process for making the different *Seals*? How has this work evolved?

The starting point is always texts that are partially extracted from the Book of Revelation. From that point on I expand my research into different areas, collecting and editing short phrases, sentences, and keywords, which are later formatted to create the final text for the videos. The series initially focused on social and political issues, and later shifts back to my personal memories, experiences, and thoughts on similar topics in the *Fourth* (2010), *Fifth* (2011), and *Sixth* (2014).

How do you manipulate the way in which audiences read the narrative? Can you also comment on the use of sound? Is there a particular stasis you want to achieve visually?

The areas for projection are from the ceiling to the walls and they vary with different *Seals*. I take into consideration the bodily experience of the audience in order to avoid repetition. I like to let the audience read the texts and understand the works, but also achieve a certain atmosphere that is not too flat. I make the texts flow rather slowly in the beginning. The audience can then read and discover the work in the space and understand the keywords and structure of the content for themselves. Afterward, I can then focus more on building up a tense atmosphere by accelerating the speed

of the flowing texts by adding more layers of texts to the work. The gentle sound at the beginning also helps to suggest a subdued atmosphere at first, which then develops into a cacophony of sounds to complement the overall movement of the projected texts.

The texts displayed in the different *Seals* are meant to address issues of war, terrorism, self-denial, and death, and collectively to express Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence. What is your view on fate? Is there a moral lesson after all?

Some *Seals* are more politically and socially driven than others. Individual *Seals* are filled with historical references, such as protests, slogans, and speeches by different politicians, ideas of capitalism and communism, etcetera. But these fragments are often mixed with my own writings, with which audiences may be familiar. With the idea of eternal recurrence, I believe things will just happen repeatedly in a slightly different way. I feel that we will never learn anything from this process. Even though we know what we should be doing, in the end, we behave differently and just follow our greed, desire, and selfishness.

How do you envision the final presentation of *The Seven Seals* in its entirety?

I can imagine two ways for presenting the whole series: to show the work using a single space, or with multiple spaces. In the former case, all seven will be played one after another, exhibited as one work. With multiple spaces, it would be like my *Ecce Homo Trilogy* (2011-12) or my exhibition at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015). Different projections will be displayed in different spaces. Enclosed areas will be built with connecting pathways for viewing the different *Seals* as a coherent narrative. This would be like a journey for the audience to engage the entire series without inhibiting their involvement and exploration. I see this as the more ideal option.

In 2012, I worked with you on the *Ecce Homo Trilogy 1*, which questions the notion of judgment and also deals with the trauma of a historical event. What was the shift from the text-based *Seven Seals* to using found footage from the internet for *Ecce Homo*?

While making one of the *Seals* back in 2010-11, there was an opportunity for a solo exhibition. I was working on footage related to [Romanian communist leader] Nicolae Ceaușescu. I thought it would be interesting to work with the space and to create a site-specific video installation. *Ecce Homo* focuses on the last moments of a dictator who was tried and executed in a brutal way. After this piece, I worked on Saddam Hussein and the footage related to his last days. The videos were shown in a monastery in Switzerland. Now, I am working on the last part of the trilogy, which focuses on Muammar Gaddafi.

***Ecce Homo Trilogy 1* addresses the tension between subjective and objective experiences, and reverses the gaze back at the viewers. In particular, the white tunnel with stationary wall texts express your personal thoughts on the matter of judgment. Moving to the other half of the gallery, the audience enters a dark sphere and bears witness to a trial, execution, and burial. Is the trilogy a critique on institutional power and its effects on how we live in society?**

This is one of the areas I like to critique. Institutional power and its enforcement of set ideologies are on the surface, while human nature is at the core.

For your participation at the Venice Biennale in 2015, why did you title your presentation *The Infinite Nothing*?



Installation view of TSANG KIN-WAH's *The Infinite Nothing*, 2015, multichannel video and sound installation, dimension variable, at the Hong Kong Pavilion, 56th Venice Biennale, 2015. Commissioned by M+ Museum, Hong Kong.

Based on Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence and other references, *The Infinite Nothing* is a work composed of four parts that form a cycle. It talks about the evolution of different stages in life. There are two rooms and a courtyard in the Hong Kong pavilion. I decided to cover the open courtyard, and to build a structure to create a singular space. The four spaces symbolize four stages, from a state of emptiness and ignorance, to a state of addressing our desire to acquire anything we are taught to acquire, and the need for social bonding. The fourth stage is where people try to overcome themselves to become better. The setup echoes the idea of eternal recurrence, that we constantly have to overcome ourselves, but without being able to reach a final destination in the end.

Nietzsche's aim was for a more ideal species of human, the overman. I long to become a better man but "better" really means nothing. Quite often I look at myself and study my behavior like an outsider. Confucius suggested that we review ourselves three times a day, which influences me a lot. It is also like Hegelian dialectics—there is another antithetical me watching me, acting against myself. Somehow the two relate to each other. It is quite difficult to translate this idea to the audience, but the loop in the work is intended to create a surrealist spectacle. I not only want to convey a sense of loss, but also try to short-circuit our rational faculty in order to make the audience become more aware of their immediate environment.

The late Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran has also influenced you. He wrote: "When all the current reasons—moral, aesthetic, religious, social, and so on—no longer guide one's life, how can one sustain life without succumbing to nothingness? Only by a connection with the absurd, by love of absolute uselessness." Is "Nothing," a restaging of your Venice Biennale presentation at Hong Kong's M+ Pavilion, an exercise in the absurd?

I felt pretty meaningless after the Venice Biennale. In the end, it was just another exhibition. I was not too optimistic or proactive. So I slipped back into "absurdity." I read Cioran afterward and reread Arthur Schopenhauer. That is the reason I altered the Venice Biennale exhibition at the M+ Pavilion, to express my conviction on nothingness and the absurdity of life. Cioran once said, "Having no reason to live, why would they have any to die?" But at the same time, we can kill ourselves whenever we want, so actually we do not have to rush to do that but just live and see how it turns out. That is the absurdity of life to me.

In your view, what is the function of art?

I did ask myself what art can do under the current circumstances, but frankly I cannot suggest any. I feel like art has no function even though it may still be able to help a little in "decorating" society and altering its appearance. Or maybe its function is like what Schopenhauer suggests, as a way to escape the Will and forget our own existence, nothing else.

Born in 1976 in Shantou, Tsang Kin-Wah is a graduate of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Camberwell College of Arts in London. Tsang represented Hong Kong in the 56th Venice Biennale (2015), and has also participated in the Istanbul Biennial (2017), the Aichi Triennale (2010), and the Biennale of Sydney (2010). Recent solo presentations have been held at the Vancouver Art Gallery (2017); M+ Pavilion, Hong Kong (2016); and Kunstmuseum Thurgau in Switzerland (2015).

David Ho Yeung Chan is a Hong Kong-based curator. He was the director of the Shanghai Gallery of Art at Three on the Bund from 2007 to 2009, and subsequently the director of Hong Kong's Osage Gallery until 2011. Chan holds a master's degree from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, New York.