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# Tang Da Wu:

## Performance and Pedagogy

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CHARMAINE TOH

In recent years, Singaporean artist Tang Da Wu (b. 1943) has repeatedly said, “I am not an artist”, and pointing at his work, “This is not art.”<sup>1</sup> How do we treat these words from a towering figure in Singapore art, credited for introducing contemporary art practices to a generation of artists?<sup>2</sup> In fact, the role of the artist and the definition of art is inextricably bound up with Tang’s own politics of art-making and thus these statements must be understood within the context of his desire to constantly question the relationship between art and society. In particular, the twin strands of performance and pedagogy have deeply informed his art practice, and in turn, offer potential answers to what art could and should be, at least for Tang. By looking at key works and statements from Tang, this short essay will show how he saw art as a path for both himself and his audience to learn more about the world around them. Furthermore, this was often a reciprocal and dynamic process, not a didactic one, which performance was particularly suited to.

In 1986, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster occurred, which left a lasting impact on Tang, who was living in London, and catalysed his thoughts on performance and pedagogy. *In the End, my Mother Decided to Eat Dogfood and Catfood* was a performance he conceived to imagine the potential fallout of nuclear pollution by drawing attention to people’s basic need for food and

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FIGURE 1: *In the End, my Mother Decided to Eat Dogfood and Catfood*, 1986, Orchard Road. Digitised by National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive with kind permission from Tang Da Wu. RC-S23-TDW.



FIGURE 2: *In the End, my Mother Decided to Eat Dogfood and Catfood*, 1986, Orchard Road. Digitised by National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive with kind permission from Tang Da Wu. RC-S23-TDW.



FIGURE 3: Untitled, 1972, Birmingham. Image courtesy of Tang Da Wu.

water (Figures 1 and 2). Tang had just completed his MFA in performance studies at Goldsmiths College and produced this monologue set in an apocalyptic world. This was a dramatic performance with a clear narrative. Tang started by describing the state the world was in and the search for edible food. He led his audience through the dystopia, offering them various fruit then snatching it away immediately, warning them about the contamination. In the end, only tinned food was safe to eat. And when that was gone, he had to resort to dog food and cat food for survival. Tang performed this twice—the first time in 1986 on Orchard Road in Singapore and the second time in 1989 at The Artists Village.

This was not Tang's first performance—he had already incorporated performance into his art as early as 1972, whilst an undergraduate sculpture student in Birmingham Polytechnic (now called the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design) (Figure 3). During this period, he realised that art could be more than just paintings on walls or sculptures on plinths, and found within the performance medium the freedom of improvisation and audience engagement. It is worth noting that Tang's art practice began in late 1960s Singapore, when painting and, to a lesser extent, sculpture dominated the scene. Tang's embrace of the ephemerality of performance thus challenged

existing modernist discourses and the art market, not to mention the pragmatic modernising policies espoused by the Singapore government.<sup>3</sup> *In the End* was also not the first time Tang brought to bear a strong pedagogical message—he had created a series of works in 1979 that sought to educate the public on environmental issues, including soil erosion from redevelopment.<sup>4</sup> By then, Tang had already articulated that, “An artist should introduce to others what he sees and learns of something. His works should provoke thoughts, not to please the eyes or to entertain...”<sup>5</sup> However, it was through *In the End*, that Tang seriously expanded the pedagogical possibilities of performance.

By using his own body and an easily understood dystopian narrative, Tang realised he could elicit a greater emotional response from his audience. Tang also addressed his audience directly—a strategy he used in many subsequent performances. The impact of a potential nuclear disaster needed to be communicated through his self; the issue demanded the immediacy of performance. This was a distinct shift from the object-based earth works of 1979. The performance had a marked pathos, showing the destructive future resulting from man’s inability to look after nature. In doing so, Tang attempted to make these abstract and distant futures more pressing and visible to the public. By personally embodying the impact of such futures, Tang invited empathy from the audience to generate discussion about the topic and to change behaviour.<sup>6</sup>

For the next few decades, Tang continued to make work that commented on man’s relationship with nature while experimenting with different artistic strategies to communicate his messages. An important development occurred in 1994 with *Sorry Whale, I Didn’t Know You Were in My Camera* when he discovered that whale gelatin was used to manufacture film cellulose. This work, which showed at the Hiroshima City Museum of Art, was an 18 metre-long whale torso that stretched across the gallery and was surrounded by thousands of film cannisters, his biggest sculpture to date (Figure 4). While Tang himself did not perform, the work nevertheless included a performative component. Visitors were invited to pick up the empty film cannisters surrounding the whale and to place them onto its wire mesh body, symbolically giving the whale back its skin. They were also asked to apologise to the whale as they did so. This physical, almost ritualistic, act placed the visitor squarely within the narrative Tang had created and heightened the affect of his lesson. In getting the audience to “perform”, Tang forced a direct confrontation with the whale carcass to elicit guilt and distress.

In the mid-1990s, Tang implemented a new methodology to deepen his interaction with audiences and initiate a new kind of relationship. This new





FIGURE 4: *Sorry Whale, I Didn't Know You Were in My Camera*, 1994, Hiroshima City Museum of Art. Image courtesy of Tang Da Wu.

format provided a more sustained engagement with participants in what I would describe as a collaborative performance.<sup>7</sup> Tang organised workshops with three broad components. During the first part of the workshop, Tang would introduce different sorts of natural materials—tin, rubber, bananas, tapiocas—and use their histories to lead broader discussions on different cultures and societies. Participants would be asked to present their thoughts and ideas to the group, to share their own histories with the subject. The second part would be a “play” session, where they would be encouraged to experiment with the material to facilitate new associations, which often resulted in completely unexpected uses. Finally, there would be a creative component where participants would make something new from the material.<sup>8</sup>

One of the plants that captured Tang’s imagination was the banana tree, which became the inspiration for *Jantung Pisang: Heart of a Tree, Heart of a People*. Tang saw the banana tree as an integral part of Southeast Asian culture and a symbol of man in harmony with nature. All parts of the banana tree are used in daily life: we eat off the leaf, we eat the fruit, the flowers are used as offerings and so on. From 1997, Tang researched stories surrounding the banana tree from all parts of Asia. During the workshops, he introduced



FIGURE 5: *Jantung Pisang: Heart of a Tree, Heart of a People*. Workshop at Cedar Girls' School. Digitised by National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive with kind permission from Tang Da Wu. RC-S23-TDW.

participants to the various parts of the banana and their cultural meanings, including all sorts of myths and legends about the plant (Figure 5). He invited them to make organic “sculptures” from the plant, which were used to decorate the banana flowers that Tang cooked and served to the participants on banana leaves. Tang often also presented the banana tree as a symbol for democracy and freedom, stating several times that “under the banana leaf, I can be myself, I have freedom.”<sup>9</sup> In a 1999 performance in Fukuoka, Tang held up a large banana leaf and invited participants to join him underneath it to share their hopes and dreams.<sup>10</sup>

Explaining his process, Tang has said: “You need to recognise the importance of myth in art making. [...] Ordinary people need to create their own myths.”<sup>11</sup> Rather than forecasting dystopias or emphasising the plight of animals to affect the audience, these workshops featured nature as a creative source of alternative histories and a platform to discuss broader issues. Tang’s role shifted from a performer-presenter to a performer-facilitator. In the process, the audience joined Tang in an ecological community, where they all shared a responsibility to nature and the environment. The sense of community that Tang attempted to create and sustain through these workshops was not only between the human participants but also with the non-human environment. Beyond the territorial lines of nation-states, these

folktales and natural materials offered a new kind of connection for everyone, one that might overcome historical conflicts and disagreements.<sup>12</sup>

In the last decade, Tang's performance practice has taken yet another turn into collaborative stage performances, which "focuses the group dynamics into creating artworks that continuously alter with each iteration".<sup>13</sup> These performances are presented by a collective called La Tristesse Opera, which include many of Tang's past and present students from the National Institute of Education.<sup>14</sup> His most recent performance *Walk Darkness Walk* in 2021 saw Tang completely off the stage. While he led the development of the piece and was present at all rehearsals and workshops, he remained backstage during the public performance and his physical presence was unseen until he emerged at the end to thank the group's supporters. He has insisted on crediting the collective rather than himself as the maker of the performance, in a natural extension of his pedagogical and participatory desires.<sup>15</sup> At 78 years of age, Tang has decided to completely efface the role of the artist-creator in favour of a mediator-educator.

Tang's proclamations of art and non-art is not an existential crisis, but the culmination of a lifetime pushing the edges of his own practice and a deep concern about the role of art in society. In an interview with a journalist in 2019, Tang explained, "I always think I'm not an artist, but I have made these works. I have my many years of learning and I like to pass it on so I teach."<sup>16</sup>

## BIOGRAPHY

**Charmaine Toh** is a curator at National Gallery Singapore, where she primarily researches photography and contemporary art in Southeast Asia. Previous exhibitions include *Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia* (2018–19), *Tang Da Wu: Earth Work 1979* (2016) and *Siapa Nama Kamu: Art in Singapore since the 19th century* (2015). She is currently working on *Living Pictures: Photography in Southeast Asia* (forthcoming 2022).



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Sarah Ng, ed., *On This Stone, We Will Build an Art School* (Singapore: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, 2020), pp. 114–5. Tang has also brought this up several times in personal conversations with the author.
- <sup>2</sup> For more information about Tang and The Artists Village, see Kian Woon Kwok and Wen Lee, eds, *The Artists Village: 20 Years On* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum and Artists Village, 2009).
- <sup>3</sup> C.J. Wan-Ling Wee, “Body and Communication : The ‘Ordinary’ Art of Tang Da Wu”, *Theatre Research International* 42, 3 (2018): 287–91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883317000591>.
- <sup>4</sup> Charmaine Toh, ed., *Earth Work 1979* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016).
- <sup>5</sup> Kwan Zi, “Art for Learning More Than Appreciation”, *The Straits Times*, Section Two, 9 April 1980.
- <sup>6</sup> Wee has discussed the significance of Tang’s performing body in invoking the specificities of his existence. Wee, “Body and Communication”, pp. 288–9.
- <sup>7</sup> In keeping with his dislike of definitions, Tang has commented, “I don’t know if you called it performance or not, I don’t care, it’s a development.” John Low, “Interview with Tang Da Wu on March 24, 2001”, in *Open Ends: A documentation exhibition of performance art in Singapore* (Singapore: Substation, 2001), n.p.
- <sup>8</sup> Lucy Davis, “Of Commodities and Kings: Tang Da Wu’s Play with Psycho-Geography and Public Memory”, *ArtAsiaPacific* (2000): 65.
- <sup>9</sup> Sian E Jay, “Ironic Twist to Substation Fund-Raiser”, *The Straits Times*, 15 November 2000.
- <sup>10</sup> A recording of this performance is kept with the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum archives.
- <sup>11</sup> Sian E Jay, “Ironic Twist to Substation Fund-Raiser”.
- <sup>12</sup> These workshops might also be seen as part of the global turn towards relational aesthetics.
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.latristsesseopera.org/about> [accessed 20 August 2021].
- <sup>14</sup> For some earlier performances, the group name was Station House da Opera and Stitchen Haus. Tang has been teaching art teachers at the National institute of Education since 2000.
- <sup>15</sup> Tang has also consistently denied his role as founder of The Artists Village, which he has described as happening organically around him.
- <sup>16</sup> Ong Sor Fern, “Revisit Sembawang through the eyes of Tang Da Wu”, *The Straits Times*, D4, 10 September 2019.