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Defining Installation Painting: Approaches and Intellectual Contexts that Bridge Dimensions under Tian

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ABSTRACT

Ever since pre-historical period, artists have been breaking dimensional limitations. Such creative artistic efforts could be constructive or deconstructive. While scholars such as Ronald J. Comer try to explore the aesthetical, multicultural, and psychodynamic implications of relevant artistic activities, the definition, basic approaches, and categories of installation painting have never been systematically examined. Unlike previous dimensional innovations in art history, installation painting, as a new genre of art, successfully integrates two-dimensional painting and three-dimensional installations. From the perspectives of art-historical, cultural, and mathematical studies, the present project delineates how “installation painting” is not just a combination of “installations” and “painting.” As the first study of installation painting, this literature summarizes the basic categories of installation painting by analyzing representative works and the artistic approaches associated to them. It is argued that installation painting is more than a simple combination of installations and painting, and that the intellectual exchanges and interactions between variant dimensions as well as those between the reviewer and the artwork create and continue to recreate the concerned installation painting. Through a case study of Tian Xing’s recent works, this project not only defines installation painting but also illustrates its basic approaches and cosmological implications, thus facilitates and promotes both the theoretical study and the artistic creations of installation painting.

Keywords: Installation Painting, Dimension, Yin and Yang, Tian Xing, fractal.

JEL classification codes: A13, C65, D46, O31, Z11.

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1. Introduction

Dimensions provide artists with freedom as well as the limitation of space and time for artistic creations. Ever since the Neolithic period, artists have demonstrated their artistic talents and intellectual insights through two- and three-dimensional media, such as two-dimensional painting, three-dimensional sculpture, and as illustrated in Figure 1, two-dimensional painting on three-dimensional sculpture or three-dimensional sculpture with two-dimensional painting (Yang, 1987:28). Traditions of Eastern and Western arts are thus defined.

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Figure 1. Neolithic Pottery. From *Zhongguo meishu quanji*, Gongyi meishu bian 1, #34, Shanghai, 1987.



Figure 2. Marcel Duchamp, *3 Standard Stoppages*, 1913-1914. Photo by the author.

Innovative artists never want to be limited by established traditions. Dismantling the representational conventions, Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) seems an attempt to depict the fourth dimension while Henry Matisse considers it a "hoax" (Turner, 1984). But this masterpiece itself is two-dimensional. Marcel Duchamp's three-dimensional readymades in 1910s are more about deconstructing the traditional definition of art rather than breaking the limitations among dimensions although his *3 Standard Stoppages* (Figure 2) shows interest in absorbing the third dimension (Molderings, 2010:41). Therefore, we see Picasso's failed fourth dimension depictions (Xing, 2018b), as well as Duchamp's shocking *Fountain* (1917) and *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) that are still two- or three-dimensional although some scholars argue, as I discuss later in this article, that *3 Standard Stoppages* are paintings.

The present project explores contemporary Chinese artist's innovative attempts to break the limitations among conventional spatial dimensions. While Walkuski Wieslaw's movie poster *Idiots* (1999) combines installation elements in painting is used as the book cover of Ronald J. Comer's *Abnormal Psychology* (7th edition), the distinguished Princeton professor is evidently interested in the psychoanalytic approach of interpreting the mysteries of artists' intentions to break limitation of the conventional dimensions in art (Comer, 2010). Although the study of installation painting is a new area without much scholarship, Ronald and Jonathan Comer's *Abnormal Psychology* (10th edition) does provide us with the insightful psychodynamic and cognitive approaches (Comer & Comer, 2018). With the funding of fractal geometry by Benoit B. Mandelbrot (1983), it is possible for us to do Chinese calligraphy in real rather than presumed fractal dimensions (Xing, 2016), thus fractal Chinese calligraphy goes from fractal to two dimensions although the tangible art works are either electronical or two-dimensional. However, fractal dimensions are not the topic of the present project. Neither are cognitive and psychological analyses of artistic creations. While information entropy theory can be applied to visual analysis of art and design (Chen & Guan, 2007), the present literature is critical, as a brief but comprehensive survey and study of installation painting, to the contemporary art, design, and information economics. This article focuses on some artworks of installation painting newly created in China that bridge different dimensions in a tangible way by combining two- and three-dimensional media. In the sections below, I first introduce the concept of installation painting, a genre including painting and installation rather than painting painted (or drawn, if the main element of the painting is drawing) on or with additional installations, by presenting representative examples of Tian Xing's recent work. As the major findings of this project, I elaborate the intellectual foundation, from the perspective of Chinese Yin and Yang cosmology, of installation painting and how such foundation supports the development of installation painting. I argue that Tian Xing's installation paintings well illustrate connections between Tian (heaven) and Ren (human). I also argue that it is the Chinese belief of *Tian Ren he yi*, i.e., the unity of heaven and human being, that enables and sustains the further

development of installation painting among variant dimensions under heaven, where dimensions and things in nature are holistically united with human. The scholarly findings of the present study in the context of Chinese cosmological and intellectual traditions are of evident ecological significance in the contemporary development of global economy.

2. Data and methodology

This is a case study based on Tian Xing's innovative work of installation painting. The approaches are art historical, cultural, and mathematical. The collection includes Tian Xing's representative installation paintings created during her period at School of Fine Arts, Nanjing University of the Arts (Nanjing, PRC, since 2019), as well as relevant supporting works created during her time at School of Architecture and Design, Southwest Jiaotong University (Chengdu, PRC, 2017-18) and Parsons School of Design (New York, USA, 2016).

Art history is not just a historical account of artists and art works. Just like intellectual history, art history is a methodology (Xing, 2018a). Only from the art historical perspective of dimensions may we properly comprehend the historical significance of installation painting that bridges various dimensions. Featuring traditional Chinese intellectual ideas such as Yin, Yang and Taiji, Chinese cosmology is not only cultural and intellectual specific but also provides installation painting with indispensable cosmological and dimensional contexts. Evidently, no dimensional issue is not mathematical. Without the perspective of mathematics, no art history is complete.

3. Installation painting and the dimensions

Installation, as a term of art form, is proposed by Daniel Buren in his article "The Function of the Studio" (1979). Before that, it is called "project art," "temporary art," "Environment (Art)," or "Exhibition," etc. (Reiss, 2001:xi). All those different names reflect some characteristics of the new genre, such as the three-dimensional aspects, temporary nature, and inclusion in our environment. As for painting, it is one of the oldest art genres that can be easily traced back to the pre-historic period, when drawing is already a critical element of painting. Generally speaking, painting is a two-dimensional form of art. However, when "installation" and "painting" are joined to become "installation painting," a new name is coined to indicate a new form of art genre that is more than "installation" plus "painting".

Both Picasso and Duchamp create their works before installation art is established as a specific form of art although Duchamp explains his 3 Standard Stoppages with "the idea of the fabrication" (Sanouillet & Peterson, 1989:22). Picasso and Duchamp both try to break the limit of two-dimensional art—Picasso attempts to present the fourth dimension while Duchamp tries to deconstruct the traditional two-dimensional painting. Of course, Duchamp is also interested in the fourth dimension as are many other artists of the time (Henderson, 2013:493). The examples below illustrate how "installation painting," or *zhuangzhi hua* in Chinese, breaks the limit of two-dimensional painting by integrating two-dimensional and three-dimensional art forms, thus bridges and extends multi-dimensions and opens new possibilities.

3.1 Installation Painting

Installation painting is painting, but painting with installations as its integral element(s). Installation painting delineates and establishes a particular relationship between painting and installation art, and further generates new ideas and connections between not only the two-dimensional and three-dimensional media but also the artists and the viewers involved.

"Hive mind" is a sociological phenomenon—"The biggest crowd wins"—pointed out by Kevin Kelly in Chapter 2 of his *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World* (1994:5). An artist sympathetic to the idea and philosophy of traditional Chinese medicine, Tian Xing considers that people are obsessed about OTC western medicine, a collective consciousness of "hive mind." In Figure 3, *Hive Mind* presents a half-consumed medicine panel as a part of a beehive. It is no more a two-dimensional painting. Neither is it a piece of three-dimensional work of installation art. It is an installation painting.



Figure 3. Tian Xing, *Hive Mind* (2020). Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4. Tian Xing, *Trim* (2020). Courtesy of the artist.

A beehive and a medicine panel may seem unrelated, but it could be argued that the panel is a kind of “hive” for the tablets. In this respect, the hive and the pills in *Hive Mind* are complementary imagery. On the contrary, a sharp metal clipper and an elegant female nude represent contradictory imagery and feelings—the former is cold and hard with cutting edges, while the latter is warm and soft with expanding beauty. Although the nail clipper in Figure 4, *Trim*, relates to the human body as a cosmetic tool, to make it a part of the graceful nude requires exceptional imagination. It strikes me that the artist successfully combines the two objects of opposing nature in a flawless way demonstrating harmony of contradictory imagery. What this installation painting eventually presents is the escalating energy the two contradictory imagery mutually generate rather than the simple combination of the two objects.



Figure 5. Tian Xing, *Little Woods* (2020). Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6. Tian Xing, *Nude Support* (2020). Courtesy of the artist.

Although strategies involving mutually complementary and mutually contradictory imagery are effective for creating installation painting, the artist also develops some other strategies, such as a metaphorical approach to produce works like *Little Woods* in Figure 5. In *Little Woods*, the comb is neither complementary nor contradictory to woods. The two are totally unrelated. But the artist makes the teeth of the comb figurative and with a few lines of trees, the comb’s teeth become a part of woods. This is a pictorial metaphor. The comb is unrelated to trees before the artist adds trees above them. But with the addition the comb immediately shares features with the trees and as with previous

works the separate images are seamlessly combined. The shadows of the teeth also add a change of the woods density to the treeline and cause the woods to vanish naturally into the horizon. Of course, no particular approach limits artistic creations. There are always outliers, such as Figure 6, *Nude Support*, that does not fall into any proposed categories.

3.2 Yin Yang and Taiji

Intellectual dimensions are different from physical or geometrical dimensions. From the perspective of cultural studies, it is not difficult to realize that the traditional Chinese concepts of Yin and Yang present two opposite intellectual dimensions, i.e., two opposite worlds of Yin and Yang (Schwartz, 1985:350-382). The intellectual dimensions of Yin and Yang point to two opposite cosmological Yin and Yang directions, the extremes of which are close to the so-called “Supreme Ultimate” (Fung, 1976:269), or Taiji in Chinese.

Traditional Chinese painters use black ink to depict Yin energy or imagery and reserve the negative space of rice paper to present Yang energy or imagery. This is how in Figure 7 we can tell the movement and rhythms of internal energy, or qi, the cosmological energy, from the dynamic brush strokes in the painting. Not only are the black brush strokes in constant movement but the negative space of the face and hair is just as alive. The powerful expression is possible through the artist’s use of qi energy in the brush strokes and exchanges between the Yin and the Yang dimensions.



Figure 7. Tian Xing, *Untitled Portrait* (2016). Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 8. Tian Xing, *Self-Portrait* (2019). Courtesy of the artist.

This communication between the cosmological Yin and Yang dimensions also occurs in non-traditional Chinese art. In Figure 8 *Self-Portrait*, the background of the portrait is reduced to be emptiness, from which the black heads arise. Although only three heads are visible, they are accompanied by constant Yin and Yang energy generating and fluctuating. It is the sharp contrast of the two extremes, i.e., the black and the white, or the Yin and the Yang that trigger the generation of the opposite energy. Therefore, the darkest head begins to vanish, and the negative space turns into productive. This is exactly the idea of Taiji—“When Quiescence has reached its limit, there is a return to Movement” (Fung, 1976:269).

It is also this idea of Taiji that enables the dimensional communications in Figure 9, *Vitality*. Placed on a piece of white paper, the gold capsule is static and luminescent. What will happen if we

gaze at it for a while? The luminous capsule, which looks like a ball of Taiji already by itself, seems about to move. This experience is the communication between the reviewer and the installation painting. It also interprets the idea of Yin, Yang and Taiji: when “Quiescence” or the Yin energy reaches its extreme, it generates “Movement”, i.e., the Yang energy. The girl in Figure 9 gapes at the static capsule, astonished with her hair blown back. The communications between the Yin and the Yang dimensions thus establish.



Figure 9. Tian Xing, *Vitality* (2020).
Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 10. Tian Xing, *Laughing* (2020).
Courtesy of the artist.

3.3 Nature within Self

Vitality also illustrates another dimension that is none-spatial: the invisible dimension of human concept. In terms of spatial dimensions, both nature (including things in nature) and human being are visible and three-dimensional. However, according to Immanuel Kant, the proposition of our common understanding of the three spatial dimensions “cannot by any means be shown from concepts, but rests immediately on intuition, and indeed on pure and a priori intuition, because it is apodictically certain” (Kant, 1783). In *Vitality*, the golden capsule is separate from the girl. But we can gather from her amazement that the capsule is in her mind. In other words, its place in the girl’s mind is an abstract concept that is neither two- nor three-dimensional. As we know, if nature or things in nature physically become part of a human body, they are three-dimensional; but when “nature within self” or things in the world become part of human being, they are not necessarily still three-dimensional as they could be conceptual. Therefore, “nature within self” is multi-dimensional, and the multi-dimensional is another feature of installation painting.

Different from previous examples of installation painting, the installation objects are physical parts of human bodies in figures 10 and 11. The title of Figure 10 is based off the Chinese idiom “Laughing Her Big Teeth off,” i.e., *xiao diao daya*, an equivalent to the English “Laughing Her Head off”. Although the focus of the painting portion is the wide laughing mouth and missing teeth, the focus of the work as a whole is the non-painting eyes. The artist paid similar attention to the dancing woman in Figure 11 in choosing to omit the eyes.

In both, it is the omission of the eyes that creates the unity of the object and the human body. In *Laughing*, the pencil shavings form two holes to replace the eyes. On their own they bear no similarity to human eyes but combined with the open mouth below they become indispensable parts of the three integral openings in the cheery face, an opposing image to Salvador Dalí’s *The Visage of War* (1940). Both the “Laughing” and the “War” face have missing teeth. Although one expression is clearly of joy and the other misery, the emotion is not the point of focus. The significance is that both the “Laughing” eyes and the “War” eyes are replaced by objects other than eyes—the “Laughing” eyes are pencil shavings and the “War” eyes are grotesque disembodied faces. When the objects are

transformed into parts of the face, the artists bridge various dimensions. Of course, Dali's War has the added layer of fractal dimensions in the infinite repetition of faces in the mouths and eyes. But in both it is the omission of real eyes that makes such dimensional associations possible.

Dancing in Figure 11 reminds me of Picasso's famous Portrait of Ambroise Vollard (1810) that also omits the subject's eyes. But while in Dancing the eyes are completely omitted, Picasso does paint Vollard's eyes in abstract geometric fragments that only appear to be eyes at first glance. There is a similarity in the depiction of the figures' bodies. The dancer's lower half is just an addition of a dark green tassel, while Vollard's entire body is a collection of mirror-like fragments. The omission of the dancer's eyes directs the viewer's attention to the tassel—now a long swaying skirt. The calculated fragments of Vollard's face make the accurate identification of Vollard's eyes mere suggestion, and the viewer thus has to explore the rest of the interconnected geometric fragments representing his body. In both Dancing and Portrait of Ambroise Vollard, the things in nature, i.e., the three-dimensional tassel and the fourth dimensional fragments, become integral parts of the figures themselves. They exemplify multi-dimensional "nature within self."



Figure 11. Tian Xing, Dancing (2020).
Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 12. Tian Xing, Self-Portrait (2016).
Courtesy of the artist.

Multi-dimensional "nature within self" illustrates one type of cosmological communications between the Yin and the Yang dimensions. When explaining Taiji, 11th century Chinese Neo-Confucian master Zhou Dunyi said, "The Two Ethers [the Yin and Yang] by their interaction operate to produce all things, and these in their turn produce and reproduce, so that transformation and change continue without end. It is man alone, however, who receives these in their highest excellence and as a result are the most intelligent [of all beings]" (Fung, 1976:270). Chinese artists are always striving to illustrate it. Figure 12 is an early self-portrait of the artist. If we take a look at the details in Figure 13, you can see that every dot of the portrait contains the Yin and the Yang, and that the whole painting of Figure 12 is just a collection of the Yin and Yang dots, each of which looks like a ball of Taiji filled with dynamic vital energy exchanges of Yin and Yang according to the details in Figure 13. The Yin and the Yang here are the same Yin and Yang which all things consisted of in nature. Therefore, each ink dot in Figure 12 is part of things in nature, and wu (things) and wo (self/human) are united as Oneness under heaven, i.e., from the unity of things and self/human (wu wo wei yi) to the unity of heaven and human being (Tian Ren he yi); consequently, variant dimensions also merge into each other.

Just like the operations of Yin and Yang explained by Neo-Confucian master Zhou, the interactions of two-dimensional painting and three-dimensional installation produce all things and continue without end. Installation painting is not just painting with the addition of an object. It is indeed "installation" and "painting", but it is more than "installation" and "painting" because they, like Yin and Yang, produce and reproduce without end under the heaven.



Figure 13. Tian Xing, Detail of Self-Portrait (2016). Courtesy of the artist.

4. Discussion

Unlike many types of avant-garde art, installation painting breaks dimensional limitation by uniting various dimensions. Duchamp explains his *3 Standard Stoppages* as—“The Idea of the Fabrication: If a straight horizontal thread one meter long falls from a height of one meter on to a horizontal plane distorting itself as it pleases and creates a new shape of the measure of length.—3 patterns obtained in more or less similar conditions: considered in their relation to one another they are an approximate reconstitution of the measure of length”; “The 3 Standard Stoppages are the meter diminished” (Molderings, 2010:1). From Figure 2 above, we see how the thin threads rest on the narrow canvases and are fixed by varnish. However, without the opportunity to observe the original, we cannot know “the fact that the threads are not only fixed with varnish but also stitched through the canvas at both ends and are therefore actually longer than one meter” (Molderings, 2010:4). This famous piece of work is unequivocally described as “painting” by George Hugnet, an artist, poet, and art historian of Dadaism and Surrealism, in one of his 1932 essays, and the idea is considered coming directly from Duchamp (Molderings, 2010:52). Hugnet is not the only scholar who takes *3 Standard Stoppages* as paintings. The title of Chapter 3 of *Duchamp and the Aesthetics of Chance*, by Herbert Molderings, was simply titled “The 3 Standard Stoppages as Paintings” (Molderings, 2010:33). As Molderings argues, the three “paintings” of *3 Standard Stoppages* were made by dropping three threads because Duchamp wants to deconstruct “the metaphor of visual rays as threads, a metaphor that has been inherent in perspectival painting ever since the Renaissance” (Molderings, 2010:50). Therefore, *3 Standard Stoppages* is not only to “absorb” the third dimension but also to deconstruct the tradition of two-dimensional perspectival painting. Duchamp evidently pays sufficient attention to the interrelationship of variant dimensions. His revolutionary vision and practice make him one of the greatest few of modern art masters although his deconstructive approach is different from the constructive one of installation painting. It is the constructive approach that facilitates installation painting to bridge rather than to absorb different dimensions.

Dated at least several centuries earlier, paper quilling artworks can be found in European museums and English literatures, such as Jane Austen’s 1811 novel *Sense and Sensibility* (Johnston,

1994:9-11). Similar to Wuhu iron painting developed in the 17th century China (Yang & Zhang, 1989), paper quilling is still three-dimensional crafts. Different from installation painting, neither paper quilling nor iron painting is a genre integrating both two- and three-dimensions. However, two- and three-dimensions are not the only dimensions artists try to bridge.

Although not an example of installation painting, Tian Xing's Medusa in Figure 14 illustrates how she bridges two- and fractal dimensions. It is self-evident that fractal dimensions are neither two- nor three-dimensions. Medusa's face and her hair of snakes are all two-dimensional in Figure 14. But her face and the snakes are not fully rendered. We are informed more than the images we can see; there are undrawn images, infinite ones, which make up an integral part of Medusa. The same can be found in the self-portrait in Figures 12 and 13—there are infinite unpainted ink dots of Yin, Yang and Taiji. They are not two-dimensional, otherwise they are visible. They are in "discordant" dimensions, as Benoit B. Mandelbrot, the father of fractal geometry, puts it. "The fact that the basic fractals are dimensionally discordant can serve to transform the concept of fractal from an intuitive to a mathematical one" (Mandelbrot, 1983:15). Mathematically, the fractal dimension is formulated by Hausdorff in 1919 and finalized by Besicovitch. Mandelbrot defines fractals as, "a set for which the Hausdorff Besicovitch dimension strictly exceeds the topological dimension" (Mandelbrot, 1983:15). The unfortunate reality is thus that those artworks created in the Hausdorff Besicovitch dimensions are normally invisible. This is one of the reasons why a history of art cannot be complete without the perspective of mathematical art history (Xing, 2018a). Like Medusa, the pills in the hive, and the trees in the little woods in Figures 3 and 5 are much more than what are shown—the artist develops and presents installation painting by depicting and bridging dimensions beyond the visible two- and three-dimensions.



Figure 14. Tian Xing, Medusa (2017).
Courtesy of the artist.

5. Conclusion

In traditional Chinese culture, everything in the world is considered under heaven, i.e., Tian xia. Therefore, the unity of heaven and human is an eternal goal of human activities because human is an integral part of heaven that is not only eternal but also constantly producing and reproducing. Yi is Oneness or the unity. In Chinese cosmology, Oneness is like Taiji, which generates Yin and Yang, and Yin and Yang interact with each other and generates all things under heaven. This is the cultural context defining the findings of the present case study. Bridging dimensions under Tian is part of the traditional Chinese idea of the unity of heaven and human being. This unity is comprehensive and contemporary. It is not only artistic but also economic. By reminding us of the cosmological and ecological implications of the fast development of global economy and technology, the insights of this installation painting project may optimize relevant social and economic policy making accordingly.

Installation painting is constructive. Just like Yin and Yang, installations and painting interact with each other and mutually exchange the cosmic Yin and Yang energies and information with each other. Thus, installation painting combines both installation and painting, and is more than the combination. According to Tian Xing's sample works in this case study, installation painting can be created and comprehended from both mutually complementary and mutually contradictory approaches. There are also other approaches, such as metaphorical approach, that are available to access to installation painting. How the artist bridges variant types of dimensions also illustrates additional approaches to create and interpret installation painting. Such approaches also define the basic categories of installation painting. Evidently, a new genre does not have to be deconstructive in order to be innovative. Bridging different dimensions constructively leads to novel forms, ideas, and territories of art, and even to unknown dimensions, such as fractal dimensions.

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